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THE
LADIES
OF
DANTE'S LYRICS

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PREFACE

IN 1914 the sum of fifty thousand dollars was given to Western Reserve University to establish The McBride Lecture Fund, as a memorial of Mr. and Mrs. J. H. McBride and their eldest son, Herbert McBride, by Malcolm McBride, Donald McBride, Edith McBride Sherman, and Grace McBride Crile, children of Mr. and Mrs. McBride, and by Ethel Tod McBride, widow of Herbert McBride, all of Cleveland. The purpose of the Fund was thus stated in the deed of gift: "We desire to have this memorial accomplish as much useful educational service to this entire community as its means make possible. The method of expressing this service now appearing best and most useful to us is by lectures given in whatever part of the city of Cleveland and with whatever manner of presentation may seem most convenient and best adapted for the kind of audience desired to be reached. We desire that the range of subjects should be as broad as possible covering so far as practicable all fields of human knowledge and activity, whether cultural, scientific, civic or political. We also desire that whenever deemed advisable the income of the memorial should be used to defray not only all expenses incidental to the delivery of the lecture, but also such publication of the contents of the lecture subsequently as may seem best."

The administration of this Fund has been in the hands of a committee made up of one member of the Faculty of Adelbert College, of the Medical School, and of the Law School, and the President of the University in an advisory capacity, and lectures upon a variety of topics have been given during the past three years. The lectures contained in this volume, delivered in February of 1917 by Professor C. H. Grandgent of Harvard University, are the first to be published by the Fund.

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THE
LADIES OF DANTE'S LYRICS

THE LADIES OF DANTE'S LYRICS

I. VIOLETTA

IT is springtime, perhaps the first of May. A company of young ladies, garlanded with flowers, hand in hand are dancing together in a round, singing the while. Not a fantastic picture, this, but an image of something that happened year by year — one of the pretty mediæval customs we have lost. Let us hope it may sometime be revived! The tune these ladies sang was called a “ballad,” a word which originally meant a bit of dance music. The piece consisted of a refrain, in which all joined, and at least one strophe sung by a single voice. First was the dancing chorus, next a pause for the solo, then the chorus and dance again. On this particular occasion the ladies are performing a ballad by a youth named Dante Alighieri: that is to say, he wrote the text; whether or not he composed the tune, we shall probably never know. It is likely enough that he did not; for poet and composer, in earlier days regularly one and the same, had begun to be differentiated; and we have no evidence that Dante ever wrote music, although he loved it. Here is the song:

Chorus

Ah! Violet, which once didst meet mine eyes,
 Shadowed by Love, appearing suddenly,
 Pity the heart which wounded was by thee,
Which hopes in thee, and, yearning for thee, dies.

Solo

Thou, Violet, in beauty past belief,
With fatal words didst kindle in my mind
 A furious fire, the while
Thou, like a blazing spirit swift and kind,
Didst fashion hope, which partly cures my grief,
 Whene'er I see thee smile.
Ah! scorn me not, tho' I myself beguile!
Think of the longings which within me burn!
For many a bygone maid, tho' slow to turn,
Hath felt at last the pain she did despise.

Chorus

Ah! Violet, which once didst meet mine eyes,
 Shadowed by Love, appearing suddenly,
 Pity the heart which wounded was by thee,
Which hopes in thee, and, yearning for thee, dies.

A scene faint as it is fair, which fades as we approach
— all the fairer for the cloud of remoteness that veils it,
and, if we look too curiously, conceals it altogether.
Nameless are those Florentine ladies who, in the latter
years of the thirteenth century, danced together in the

new season, singing the verses of their young fellow-townsmen, who was destined to be so illustrious. Who was Violet ? Was she a damsel of flesh and blood ? Was she the creature of a spring poet's fancy ? Was she a literary commonplace ? Doubtless our enjoyment is enhanced by ignorance, for mystery is more alluring than precise but insignificant fact; yet our indiscretion is forever itching to penetrate the mist. Let us yield to it for an hour, trusting, at the bottom of our hearts, that our efforts will be vain.

To follow any trail, however vague and vanishing, through Dante's poems is a quest that brings its own reward. Our hunting ground to-day shall be the earlier chapters of the *Vita Nuova*, and also the unattached sonnets and ballads that have been transmitted to us in various lyric miscellanies. Since in these collections the attributions of authorship are often contradictory or altogether lacking, there is uncertainty concerning many poems to which Dante's name has at one time or another been attached; but with regard to others there need be no doubt, because they are designated as his by Dante himself in one of his surely authentic works, or mentioned as his by contemporaries who were in a position to learn the truth, or ascribed to him by a great number of good manuscripts. Of internal evidence there is little, save the beauty of the verse and the character of the thought — both untrustworthy criteria; for other excellent poets of his day shared his ideas. As to the time

and circumstances of composition, next to nothing is known.

For the *Vita Nuova*, or *New Life*, the case is quite different. No one questions its authorship, and its date is fixed with tolerable precision. The little book — spiritual autobiography or autobiographical romance, however one choose to call it — was put together when the poet was about twenty-eight or twenty-nine years old, some three or four years after the death of his Beatrice. It consists of a series of poems, selected from those written and published by the author during the past ten years, and embedded in a prose commentary which forms a more or less connected narrative. Intimate as it is in its confession of sentiment, it is equally discreet, and reveals surprisingly little in the way of tangible fact. Our other sources of information, too, are almost barren for the first stages of Dante's life. This much we can tell, that, born in the busy, gossipy little city of Florence, and left an orphan while still a boy, with a brother and a couple of sisters, all younger than himself, he was well bred, and won early distinction as a poet; belonging to a genteel but not wealthy stock, he associated with the best families of the town, and was in childhood affianced to a daughter of the aristocratic Donati clan, whom he married when he was not far from thirty. That is virtually all. Some of his friends, to be sure, we can name: first of all, the distinguished and well-to-do Guido Cavalcanti, a poet,

scholar, and man of public affairs, older than Dante; next, a brother of Beatrice, otherwise unknown; then Dante's contemporary, Lapo Gianni, and his junior, Cino da Pistoia, both poets, the latter also an eminent jurist; finally the artist, Giotto, and the musician, Casella. To these may be added the elderly statesman and author, Brunetto Latini, sage counselor of Dante's boyhood.

But what is to be said of his female friends, the object of our search? Aside from his wife, Gemma, whom he never mentions, four ladies, even to us not entirely devoid of individuality, seem to have influenced his life — the four whom we call, after him, Beatrice, Matelda, Lisetta, Pietra: to these my remaining lectures shall be devoted. To-day we are ostensibly on the hunt for sundry dim, elusive figures, probably but not certainly different from the more distinct four. We shall not catch them; but, like many an unsuccessful huntsman, we may enjoy the sport. They are the ghosts of damsels admired and sung by Dante in his early youth. He surely knew many ladies by name. There are the bands that danced to his ballads, the "passing troop of ladies gentle-bred" whom he encountered on All Saints' Day and immortalized in a sonnet, the feminine circle that criticized his amatory style, the companions of Beatrice who made sport of him at a wedding banquet; above all, the "sixty most beautiful ladies" of Florence, whom he enumerated in a long poem, unfortunately lost, but described in the *New Life*.

A sonnet written by Dante in answer to a query, also in sonnet form, from his friend and fellow-poet, Cino da Pistoia, seems to reveal a degree of inconstancy which the author, in other moments, would have disavowed. Here is the curious little poem:

Not since my solar years have numbered nine
 Love's company have I a single moment quit;
 His busy spur I know, I know his bit,
 And how he makes us laugh and then repine.
 Against him, reason human or divine
 Is weak as music when the thunders split:
 Think you with lute, when skies are lightning-lit,
 To make the strife of elements decline ?
 Within the reach of his relentless dart
 Free will is never truly free nor bold,
 And vain is all defence of wit and art.
 New spurs, indeed, may take the place of old;
 And whatsoever fresh delight they start,
 We must pursue it, if the other's cold.

For this sentiment the author was rebuked by another poet, Cecco d'Ascoli. It was probably some other kind of shortcoming that elicited the stern criticism of Dante's closest friend, Guido Cavalcanti, one of whose sonnets begins:

I come to see thee countless times a day
 And find thee all too vulgarly inclined.

Oddly enough, doubtless at a different period of his life (if we only knew when!), Dante reproached Cino for the same kind of fickleness condoned above:

O Master Cino, these your trivial rimes
I thought that I had once for all forsook,
Since quite another course my Argo took —
My ship that steers away to distant climes.
But, having heard it said full many times
That you are quickly caught by every hook,
Once more a little while I backward look,
Once more this pen my weary hand begrimes.
Whoso, like you, forever fresh in love,
By every charm is bound, then breaks away,
From Cupid's wound can scarcely suffer long.
Now if your heart is always prone to stray,
Correct it, I beseech by God above,
Until your actions match your gentle song.

How are we to interpret such utterances as these? How much of the authors' actual lives do they contain? Do they refer to shifting but real affections, natural enough in young men; or to social attentions politely tinged with tenderness; or to purely literary attachments? Every one of these hypotheses is so plausible that — lacking, as we do, convincing evidence of any kind — we hardly feel justified in rejecting it in favor of either of the others.

It stands to reason that medieval youths, even as those of our own day, were inclined to fall into an amorous state, and sometimes, no doubt, in love with love, they remained faithful to it, while changing its bodily symbol. An immortal example is Romeo. On the other hand, in the recently developed society of the late

middle ages, gallantry of gentleman to lady, even service of vassal to mistress, readily took on the forms of passionate devotion; and courteous conversation was largely based on the assumption of irresistible beauty on the feminine side and a responsive heart on the masculine. Such a convention is likely to guide converse in a community whose good breeding is considerably in excess of its fund of topics adapted to cultivated discourse. Some specimens of such polished dialogue are extant in the old romances, and a few in the manuals of conduct composed for young ladies. Occasionally, of course, the man and woman really were in love, and then we may have, as at the end of the Provençal romance of *Jaufre*, a scene not unlike the closing chapter of a Victorian novel.

In most amatory conversations, however, we may be fairly sure that the inflamed heart was a genteel fiction, and was so understood by both parties. At any rate, this must have been usually the case in medieval amatory poetry, which, for the most part, seems to have been addressed by a household dependent or a paid entertainer to the mistress of the mansion, whom the author complimented by feigning a melancholy passion for her. Hence it came about that the main business of a troubadour was to advertise, under the thin veil of a pretended name, the superhuman charms of a selected lady and his own suffering and fidelity. This style was adopted even by the exceptional poets who were of

high rank; and when one of these actually did love his lady, he could scarcely find a mode of expression different from that established by the professional songsters. We are therefore continually balked when, lured by a note of apparently vibrant emotion, we try to guess whether behind the impassioned verse there lurks a genuine affection.

With the spread of French literary culture to neighboring and even to distant lands, the fashion of conventional love-poems was carried from southern France to Italy, where, in the early thirteenth century, it came to be followed by Italian writers in an Italian vernacular. A considerable amount of this verse has come down to us in old songbooks. Here is the close, or envoy, of an ode by Pier della Vigna, chancellor of the great emperor, Frederick II:

My little song, go, carry this lament
To her who safely holds my heart in keep,
And tell her all my ills, if she consent,
And tell her how she maketh me to weep.
And let her send reply to him who loves,
How love shall well rewarded be ere long;
And if he ever did her any wrong,
He will accept what penance she approves.

It is difficult to believe that the imperial chancellor is here doing more than try his hand at an intellectual pastime recently come into vogue. We receive a similar

impression from the following poetic effort of Percivalle Doria, member of a princely house of Genoa:

Cupid hath captured me
And put me in the keeping
Of this insensate love,
Which holds me wrongfully
And turns my joy to weeping.
I curse the power above
That maketh me revere
Some one who will not hear
Nor look upon her slave,
Whom she alone can save.
I suffer so that, if I longer stay,
In fruitless yearning I shall pine away.

In the desert of our ignorance there is one oasis of knowledge, or at least of probability. Whoever this "some one" may have been, we may safely conjecture that she was wedded. For according to the rules of courtly verse the object of adoration must be a married woman; and there should properly be a romantic element of danger from the fury of a jealous husband, whose suspicions may be aroused by spiteful tale-bearers. That is the situation in these lines by Compagnetto da Prato, in which the woman speaks:

Pray succor me, my lover true!
A hag, my neighbor, spoils my peace;
She has divined my love for you,
And now her slanders never cease.

Again, the same author puts the following lines into the mouth of a woman:

My husband's cruelty
Let love into my breast,
And now my heart's at rest.
When he tormented me,
Love came, my pain to cure
(I'd no such thought before).
A lover, good and sure,
Consoles me ever more
For all that I endure.
O foolish, jealous man,
I care not how you strike:
Belabor as you like,
Destroy love if you can!
I knew not what it meant
Till you did first accuse;
The love you did invent
I could not well refuse.
Yours be the punishment!

One of the best among the early Italian poets, Giacomino Pugliese, makes a woman excuse herself thus, to her impatient lover, for not allowing him to see her, ascribing her retirement to the watchfulness of her cruel husband:

My lord, I am compelled
To crouch and hide my head,
So closely am I held
By one whom God strike dead!

And I must shun the door,
As, to my shame, you know.
I grieve forever more,
And you no mercy show.

Now, the fashion of lyric verse originally grew up in France, a feudal land, where the first development of cultivated society took place, not in cities, but in the isolated castles of the aristocracy; that is, in little, select communities, hierarchically stratified, and ruled by the lord and lady of the manor. It was a society bent on enjoying its newly acquired and always precarious wealth and ease, conscious of its growing distinction, and prone to cherish conventions that should widen the gulf between its own elegance and the grossness of the inhabitants of fields and towns. Peasants were the butt of its ridicule, burghers became the object of its destestation and ultimately the cause of its downfall. The influence of this uncompromisingly aristocratic spirit, and of the social customs that went with it, extended far beyond the region of its birth.

In so far as the ideals of this society were embodied in verse, they were generally copied by the earliest school of Italian poets, a group of eminent men of law and men of arms, collected at the magnificent court of the emperor. Some of the Provençal themes, to be sure, they neglected, while others were carried by them further than they had evolved in southern France. After this first band of singers, whose music ceased with the

death of Frederick in 1250, appeared for a little while a school of miscellaneous Tuscan and Bolognese versifiers, who followed, in the main, the same conventions, and blindly imitated the Provençal troubadours of the period of decline. To call them blind is not unjust, for the conditions in which they lived were remote from those under which their adopted system had come into being. In Italy, especially in the north and the centre, civilization was essentially urban: it was the townspeople, the clerks, the guilds, the manufacturers and tradesmen, rather than a rustic nobility, that cultivated the arts. They were a sober, thrifty, earnest, God-fearing set of men, to whom the esoteric elegance and immorality of Provence were foreign.

It is, therefore, not surprising that Italian poetry, first in Bologna, then in Florence, should have refashioned itself into better accord with its environment, becoming simpler, clearer, prettier, fresher in form and at the same time deeper in thought. To the subjection of the lover and the feudal superiority of his beloved was given, under the influence of Christian philosophy, a new significance, more in keeping with Italian practical and religious habits.

That new meaning seems very strange to us, an outgrowth of a time far removed. It was the age of symbolism, of allegory, which pervaded not only Biblical interpretation and church offices and architecture, but also the whole conception of literature and science.

Just as, in scholastic exegesis, every important incident in the Old Testament, though literally true, foreshadows some event in the New, so almost anything in the world of fact or the world of fiction might be understood as a mystic figure of something else. The worshipped lady, then, — who was no longer of necessity a married woman and a social superior, — became, without abdicating her reality, a symbol of something unquestionably venerable: to wit, the heavenly intelligence, which is another name for the angels, readers of God's mind and executors of his design. Both woman and angel she now was, an object of love and of reverence. The love was a respectful one, and might be innocent even in thought; the reverence was paid to something higher than earthly rank. With this novel conception of the lady came an ethical definition of nobility, which was described as the result, not of an accident of birth, but of a special grace of God, manifesting itself in lofty moral character. Furthermore, love, according to the new doctrine, is an attribute of the noble heart alone: no vulgar nature can feel or understand it. In the gentle heart, however, love exists potentially from birth, lying dormant until stirred to activity by the sight of a worthy object; and, after its awakening, it becomes the absolute but beneficent tyrant of life. Thus the lover, while still, like his Gallic prototype, a subject, is henceforth subject only to a divine power.

These ideas were put forth by a learned and artistic poet of Bologna, Guido Guinizelli, whom Dante called "my master, and master of all those, my betters, who ever wrote sweet rimes of love." We find them for the first time explicitly phrased in Guido's famous poem, *Al cor gentil ripara sempre Amore*, "Love repairs always to the noble heart," a work to which Dante more than once refers. Here it is, as translated by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, in his volume entitled *Dante and his Circle*:

Within the gentle heart Love shelters him,
As birds within the green shade of the grove.
Before the gentle heart, in Nature's scheme,
Love was not, nor the gentle heart ere Love.

For with the sun, at once,
So sprang the light immediately; nor was
Its birth before the sun's.

And Love hath his effect in gentleness
Of very self; even as
Within the middle fire the heat's excess.

The fire of Love comes to the gentle heart
Like as its virtue to a precious stone;
To which no star its influence can impart
Till it is made a pure thing by the sun:

For when the sun hath smit
From out its essence that which there was vile,
The star endoweth it.

And so the heart created by God's breath
Pure, true, and free from guile,
A woman, like a star, enamoureth.

In gentle heart Love for like reason is
For which the lamp's high flame is fanned and bowed:
Clear, piercing bright, it shines for its own bliss;
Nor would not burn there else, it is so proud.
For evil natures meet
With Love as it were water met with fire,
As cold abhorring heat.
Through gentle heart Love doth a track divine, —
Like knowing like; the same
As diamond runs through iron in a mine.
The sun strikes full upon the mud all day:
It remains vile, nor is the sun's worth less.
"By race I am gentle," the proud man doth say:
He is the mud, the sun is gentleness.
Let no man predicate
That aught the name of gentleness should have,
Even in a king's estate,
Except the heart there be a gentle man's.
The star-beam lights the wave, —
Heaven holds the star and the star's radiance.
God, in the understanding of high Heaven,
Burns more than in our sight the living sun:
There to behold His Face unveiled is given;
And Heaven, whose will is homage paid to One,
Fulfils the things which live
In God, from the beginning excellent.
So should my lady give
That truth which in her eyes is glorified,
On which her heart is bent,
To me whose service waiteth at her side.

My lady, God shall ask, "What darest thou?"
(When my soul stands with all her acts review'd)
"Thou passedst Heaven, into My sight, as now,
To make Me of vain love similitude.
To Me doth praise belong,
And to the Queen of all the realm of grace
Who slayeth fraud and wrong."
Then may I plead: "As though from Thee he came,
Love wore an angel's face:
Lord, if I loved her, count it not my shame."

Guinizelli's view of nobility was developed by Dante in scholastic style in the third ode of his *Banquet*. His idea of love we find, rephrased and slightly altered, in a sonnet of Dante's *New Life*:

The gentle heart and love are all the same,
As in his verse the knowing Bard hath writ;
And neither one can independence claim,
E'en as the witting soul depends on wit.
Nature creates, when lovingly aflame,
Love, to command, the heart, to harbor it;
Wherein it slumbering rests, alive but tame,
While passing seasons, few or many, flit.
Now comes a lady beauteous and pure,
Who so delights the eyes that in the heart
Desire arises for her beauty then,
And oft within the breast doth so endure
That love at last awakens with a start. —
No less are ladies won by worthy men.

The love theories of Guinizelli were put into literary practice, in the next generation, by a small group of poets, — Guido Cavalcanti, Dante Alighieri, Gianni Alfani, Dino Frescobaldi, Lapo Gianni, Cino da Pistoia, — who shaped the novel manner known as the *dolce stil nuovo*, or “sweet new style,” a name bestowed upon it by Dante himself, in a passage of his *Purgatory*. However, by no means all the verse even of these few poets follows the new pattern, and after their death the style soon went out of vogue; but while it lasted, it gave rise to some of the finest love poetry ever composed — poetry which attracts us still, by its soft beauty, by its spiritual tone, and by the air of mystery that pervades it. Here is a sonnet, probably by Dante, which illustrates its lighter, daintier vein:

This last All Saints' I saw a pretty sight,
A passing troop of ladies gentle-bred;
And, leading Love beside her on the right,
One special lady seemed to walk ahead.
Aglow, as 't were a fire-envelopt sprite,
A radiance from beneath her eyelids sped.
Seeking her face, as boldly as I might,
I saw therein an angel picturèd.
A greeting she to all the worthy gave, —
The kind and modest lady, — with her eyes,
And made the hearts of all she greeted, brave.
This queen was surely born beyond the skies,
And came to earth our sinful souls to save.
Then blest the maid to follow her who tries!

The following sonnet from the *New Life*, though very similar, is in a somewhat more solemn mood:

My Lady carries Love within her eyes,
And thus ennobles all she looks upon.
All turn to watch her, while she passes on;
The one she greets, with heart a-quiver, sighs
And, bending down his visage, nearly dies,
So full of shame for all the wrong he's done.
As she advances, pride and wrath are gone.
(How, ladies, can I honor her? Advise!)
All sweetness, every lowly thought and true
Invade the heart of him who hears her speak,
And he who once beholds her, fareth well.
Her beauty, when she faintly smiles, to tell,
Both speech and memory are far too weak,
'Tis such a noble miracle, and new.

In the third strophe of the ode *Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore*, "Ladies who have understanding of love," we find the same spirit and the same ideas:

My lady's longed for in the heavens above.
Now let me tell you of her wondrous might.
Whatever lady would be "gentle" hight
Should walk with her; for when she goes her way,
A chill is cast on vulgar hearts by Love,
And all their thoughts are cold and dead with fright.
Whoe'er should stand his ground to see the sight
Would be ennobled or would turn to clay.
When she discerns a worthy man who may

Rightly behold her, he must own her power;
For blessedness she gives, a mystic dower,
So humbling him, no spite can with him stay.
God granteth her a grace that's greater still:
Who speaks to her, escapes eternal ill.

In like style Cavalcanti sang in *Gli occhi di quella*:

She shows herself
So gentle, I the thought can never brook
That any mortal man should dare to look
And not be set a-quiver, should he try.
If I should gaze upon her, I should die.

Before him, Guinizelli, father of the sweet new style,
composed his *Voglio del ver la mia donna laudare*:

She walks her way so gentle and so sweet,
She levels pride in him she doth address,
And makes him Christian, were he not before.
No vulgar man may venture her to greet.
She hath, I swear, a greater blessedness:
Who looks at her, can think no evil more.

We have strayed a long way from Violet and her pretty ballad. In that, we saw no trace of superwoman nor of mysticism, and the same thing is true of much of Dante's verse; but it is not always easy to tell where allegory begins. Between the extremes of manifest simplicity and manifest symbolism there lies a considerable region of more or less uncertain character. Luckily we have one clue. The *New Life* contains a curious passage

which plainly indicates a conscious change of style, a conversion to the mode of Guinizelli — at least, in all poetry that shall be concerned with Beatrice. “After I had written these three sonnets addressed to this lady, resolving (inasmuch as they had narrated nearly all my condition) to hold my peace, since it seemed to me I had disclosed enough of myself, I was constrained, while refraining henceforth from directing my speech to her, to find a new theme more worthy than my former one. And inasmuch as the occasion of my new theme is pleasant to hear, I shall tell it as briefly as I can. Forasmuch as many people had from my looks guessed my heart’s secret, certain ladies, who had gathered together for the pleasure of one another’s company, were well acquainted with my heart, every one of them having been present at many of my discomfitures. And as I passed near them, guided, as it were, by fortune, I was called by one of these gentle ladies; and she who had called me was possessed of very charming speech. Therefore, when I had come before them, and had plainly seen that my most gentle lady was not among them, taking heart, I greeted them and asked what was their pleasure. The ladies were many, and among them were some who were laughing together. Others there were who were watching for me to speak. Others there were conversing together, one of whom, turning her eyes toward me and calling me by name, spake these words: ‘To what purpose lovest thou this lady of thine, since thou canst not

endure her presence ? Tell us, for the purpose of such a love must needs be strange indeed.' And when she had spoken these words to me, not only she but all the others began visibly to await my reply. Then I spake to them these words: 'My ladies, the purpose of my love was once the greeting of this lady — perhaps the person whom you mean; and in that dwelt the happiness which was the goal of all my desires. But since it hath been her pleasure to deny it to me, my lord Love, in his mercy, hath placed all my happiness in something that cannot fail me.' Thereupon these ladies began to converse together; and, as sometimes we see water falling mixed with pretty snow, so it seemed to me I heard their words issue forth mixed with sighs. And when they had conversed a little together, that same lady who had first spoken to me said these words: 'We beg thee to tell us in what this happiness of thine consists.' And I, replying, spake thus: 'In those words which praise my lady.' And she answered: 'If thy speech were true, thou wouldst have wrought with a different design those words which thou hast written, proclaiming thy condition.' Whereat I, considering these words, departed from the ladies as one ashamed; and I kept saying to myself: 'Since there is so much happiness in those words which praise my lady, why have I spoken aught else ?' And therefore I determined always to take as subject of my speech henceforth that which should be in praise of that most gentle lady. And,

as I reflected much upon it, I seemed to have undertaken a theme too exalted for me, so that I dared not begin; and thus I remained some days, eager to write and afraid to begin."

When, after arduous meditation, he did begin, he composed his first ode in the new style, *Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore*, which he appears ever afterward to have regarded as a landmark in his literary career. It evidently testifies to the transition from his first to his second manner. One of its stanzas we have just seen. With Dante's subsequent work we need not further occupy ourselves as yet, our present concern being his poetic and amorous fancy before this change.

In the earlier period, his poems, even those addressed to Beatrice, generally give, by comparison, the impression of old-fashioned love-songs, in kind not unlike those made for other ladies by other poets. When we look at the lyrics outside the *New Life*, — that is, those poems whose subject and address are not specified by the author, — we are often unable to say whether they are meant for Beatrice or for some lady unknown to us; indeed, the attribution of authorship in the manuscripts is frequently our only indication that Dante wrote them at all. We have no means of identifying the fair invalid who figures in the ode *Morte, poich'io non truovo a cui mi doglia*, "O Death, since I find no one to listen to my plaint;" nor the distant love in *La dispietata mente, che pur mira*:

The memory, — which constantly doth look,
 All pitiless, at seasons past away, —
 Attacketh here my desolated heart;
 And tender longing for the land forsook,
 Which draws me sweetly whence I had to stray,
 Attacks it there, and Love is taking part.

The very Violet for whose sake we began our fruitless quest, may, for aught we positively know, have been Beatrice herself.

On the other hand, critics have not failed to suggest that some of the lyrics devoted in the *New Life* to Beatrice were perhaps originally intended for somebody else. Such a poem as the following, indeed, might have been written under the inspiration of almost any one who could suggest so much as a thought of love:

Of Love within me speaketh every thought;
 And yet they show so much variety
 That one doth make me crave his tyranny,
 Another reckons all his power as naught,
 Another, hopeful, sweetness may have brought,
 Another makes me weep full frequently.
 Only agreed in asking sympathy,
 They quake with fear, by which the heart is caught.
 And therefore, doubting which my theme shall be,
 I fain would write, but know not what to say,
 And thus in Love's bewildering maze am lost.
 Would I agreement have, at any cost,
 Mine enemy I needs must call and pray:
 "My lady Pity, come and comfort me!"

Another discussion of love, in the same early part of the *New Life*, is a bit less impersonal and far more tragically conceived:

Come flocking fast into my mind alway
The sadnesses that Love imparts to me,
And pity comes so sharp, it makes me say
And say again: "Alas! can such things be!"
For Love attacks me with so sudden fray
That nearly all my life he makes to flee;
One single living spirit still doth stay,
And it abides because it speaks of thee.
Then I arouse me, for I will not die,
And pallid, void of vigor, forth I start
To look on thee, and think to heal my pain.
But if I lift mine eyes, my hope to spy,
An earthquake rumbles in my frightened heart,
And makes my soul depart from every vein.

With these, perhaps, belongs the sonnet, not included in the *New Life*, entitled *Deh, ragioniamo un poco, O Amore*. Again, the first sonnet of the little book, the famous allegorical dream of Love, contains nothing to attach it to one woman rather than another. With regard to the original purpose of such poems as these, we must take the author's word, which we really have no sufficient reason to doubt.

A few, however, of the early poems to Beatrice are slightly more concrete, evidently containing reference to some specific incident, an account of which is in each

case furnished by the prose narrative, and this explanation is satisfactory enough, provided we once admit the vaguely biographical character of the whole work. As we shall presently see, Dante, by his insistent attentions to another lady, so incurred the displeasure of Beatrice that she refused thereafter to recognize him when they met. Hence the following ballad, which probably first reached the ears of the offended one at a dance, where it was sung by feminine companions. Unlike our first ballad, which had only one stanza for a single voice, this one has four strophes for a solo singer. Here is the chorus, which precedes the first stanza and follows each:

Ballad, I bid thee summon Love for me,
And then with him before my Lady fare,
That Love, my Lord, may freely argue there
The very thing which thou shalt sing: my plea.

In each strophe the last line rimes with the first and fourth lines of the chorus. The poet addresses himself, not to his lady, but to his poem, which he sends to Beatrice accompanied by Love; and Love is to defend him with the words of the ballad.

So courteous, Ballad, doth thy flight appear
That unaccompanied
Full boldly shouldst thou go on any quest;
But if thou fain wouldst be devoid of fear,
Find out where Love is hid,

For journeying with him perhaps is best;
Since she to whom thy song's addrest,
If, as I think, she holds me in despite
And thou shouldst not be sheltered by his might,
Right easily would turn her back to thee.

Safe at the side of Love, with music sweet
Begin such words as these
(But first beseech her not to wish me ill):
“ My Lady, he who sends me, you to greet,
Entreats you, when you please,
If he have any case, to hear it still.
For here is Love, who maketh him at will
Turn red and white before your loveliness.
Now, why Love bade him gaze on others, guess!
His heart was never changed by Love's decree.”

“ My Lady,” say to her, “ his faithful heart
Hath been so sure and stout,
His every thought doth service unto you.
Yours from the first, he never wisht to part.”
And, if she harbor doubt,
Tell her to question Love whether 't is true.
And, having spoke this message, humbly sue,
If she should find it irksome to forgive,
That she command me now to cease to live:
A trusty slave's obedience she shall see.

Before the moment come, thy leave to take,
Tell pity's gatekeeper,
Who knoweth how my righteous cause to speed:

“I pray thee, for my gentle music’s sake
Do thou stay here with her;
For this, thy servant, choose thy words and plead.
And if to thine entreaty she give heed,
A kindly glance be signal of his peace.”
Set forth, sweet Ballad, fix thine own release
At such a time that thou shalt honored be.

Dante’s bad reputation and the disfavor of Beatrice had a consequence even more disastrous than the denial of her salutation. According to the Florentine ordinances, a common citizen invited to a marriage was allowed to take with him one companion. This privilege was used, by a well-meaning friend, to introduce Dante at a wedding banquet where many beautiful ladies were gathered to accompany the bride. “Wherefore I,” says the poet, “thinking to do the pleasure of this friend, resolved to stay and wait on the ladies with him. And when I had come to this decision, I seemed to feel a wondrous quiver begin in my breast, on the left side, and quickly spread through all parts of my body. Then, I declare, I leaned my person, dissembling, against a painting which ran around this apartment; and, fearing that some one had observed my tremor, I raised my eyes, and, gazing at the ladies, I saw among them the most gentle Beatrice.” After a description of the strange effects of this sudden encounter, he continues: “I declare that many of these ladies, perceiving my transfiguration, began to marvel; and, chatting, they mocked

at me with this most gentle one. Whereat my honestly deceived friend took me by the hand, and, leading me forth from the sight of these ladies, asked me what ailed me. Then, having composed myself a little . . . , I spake to this my friend these words: 'I had set foot on that part of life beyond which no one can go with expectation of return.' And, parting from him, I returned to my chamber of tears, in which, weeping and ashamed, I said to myself: 'If this lady knew my state, I do not think she would thus mock at my person; rather do I believe that she would greatly pity it.' And, thus weeping, I resolved to write words in which, addressing her, I should make known the cause of my transfiguration, declaring that I am quite sure it is not known, and that, were it known, I believe it would move people to pity; and I resolved to write them, hoping they might by chance come to her hearing. And then I wrote this sonnet." Note that Dante says "come to her *hearing*." The word *sonnet* primarily meant a "little tune;" and the poem bearing that name was still, it would seem, sometimes sung. The sonnet in question begins thus:

With other ladies mocking at my face,
You care not, Lady, whence it comes that I
With such a strange appearance come anigh
Whene'er I gaze upon your lovely grace.

Were these ladies, I wonder, the same as those who, having been present at many of Dante's discomfitures, subsequently criticized his love-making, showing him

that his theoretical purpose was not the purpose manifest in his poems ?

This mockery, which rankled in the poet's heart, forms the theme of another poem. "After my strange transfiguration," he says, "there came to me a potent thought, which scarcely left me, but rebuked me again and again, speaking to me as follows: 'Inasmuch as thou dost cut such a sorry figure when thou art near this lady, why dost thou still try to see her? Lo, shouldst thou be questioned by her, what wouldst thou have to reply, supposing all thy faculties were so free that thou couldst make answer to her?' And to this thought responded another, a meek one, saying: 'If I did not lose my faculties, and were so free that I could make answer to her, I should say that no sooner do I picture to myself her marvelous beauty than there comes upon me a desire to see her, which is of such power that it kills and destroys in my memory whatsoever might arise against it; and therefore my past sufferings do not prevent me from seeking to see her.' " Here is the sonnet that follows:

All things that memory cites to hinder me,

Whene'er I seek you, beauteous jewel, die.

As I approach you, Love is calling: "Flee,

If death be irksome! Save thyself, O try!"

My heart hath lent my face his livery —

My swooning heart, which leans on aught that's nigh.

When they my reeling, drunken tremor see,

The stones "O let him perish!" seem to cry.
Full sinful he who sees me deathly ill
And gives no comfort to my soul affright,
With just a show of sympathetic care,
For sake of pity — which your mockeries kill!
For pity is engendered by the sight
Of ghastly eyes, a death-imploring pair!

To this same period we may tentatively assign two unincluded sonnets, *Io son sì vago della bella luce* and *O dolci rime che parlando andate*, the first a poem of reproach, the second one of self-defence.

The disapproval of Beatrice was due, in the first place, to Dante's excessive attention to another lady. In fact, we find, in Chapters V to X of the *New Life*, three feminine figures other than "the most gentle one." The second of the three, a friend of Beatrice, is mourned as dead by the poet, who devotes to her two pretty little elegies in sonnet form; to her we shall return later, when considering Matilda. Let us see what Dante has to say of the other two.

"One day it came to pass that this most gentle one [Beatrice] was sitting in a place where were heard words of the Queen of glory, and I was in a place whence I could see my blessedness. And midway between her and me, in a straight line, sat a gentle lady of right pleasing appearance, who looked at me many times, wondering at my gaze, which seemed to end on her; wherefore many people took notice of her looking. And

so much heed was given to it that, as I went away from the spot, I heard behind me: 'See how such and such a lady wastes the flesh of this man? And, as they named her, I understood that they were speaking of her who had been between in the straight line which started from the most gentle Beatrice and ended in my eyes. Then was I greatly heartened, being assured that on that day my secret had not been betrayed by my looks. And forthwith I determined to make of this gentle lady a screen of the truth; and of this I gave, in a little while, such evidence that most people who spake of me thought they knew my secret. With this lady did I conceal myself some months and years; and, to make others believe, I composed for her certain little things in rime, which it is not my intention to write down here.' In this passage we find, explicitly avowed, an apparent attachment, of more than one year's duration, which was probably more real than Dante would have us believe, and which was the occasion of "certain little things in rime," surely known to the first readers of the *New Life*. Possibly the ballad of Violet was one of these; perhaps the sonnet, *Non mi poriano mai far amenda*, or *Nelle man vostre, gentil donna mia*. However that may be, Dante proceeds next to tell us of the lost poem which names "the sixty most beautiful ladies of the city." Among these ladies, he declares, Beatrice is ninth; and we may surmise that the screen lady was first.

“The lady,” he continues, “with whom I had so long hidden my wish, was obliged to depart from the aforesaid city and go to a very distant place. Whereat I, dismayed, as it were, over the fair protection that had failed me, was far more downcast than I myself should have believed beforehand. And reflecting that, if I did not speak somewhat sorrowfully of her departure, people would the more quickly discover my concealment, I determined to make some kind of lament over it in a sonnet, which I shall write down, inasmuch as my lady [Beatrice] was the immediate cause of certain words in the sonnet, as is manifest to one who understands. Then I wrote this sonnet.” The poem is of a type, long since gone out of use, called *sonetto rinterzato*, because it is lengthened by the insertion of six short lines. The middle part of it, telling of his blissfully amorous state, was composed, he presently avers, “with a different meaning from that which the two ends of the sonnet indicate:” that is, he wishes us to believe that he really had Beatrice in mind while writing these verses ostensibly declaring his love for another. The sonnet runs as follows:

O ye who walk along the lovers' way,
Ah look, give heed, and stay!
Is any grief as great as mine, or sad ?
Just bear to hear my tale, 't is all I pray;
Then judge, yourselves, and say
My fate 's the sole abode of all that 's bad.

'T was not my despicable merit, nay,
'T was Love's own gentle ray
That made my life so bright and sweet and glad,
I often heard men whisper: "Look," said they,
"What worthiness to-day
Gives him the lightest heart he ever had?"
But now my cheerfulness is sunken low,
Which Love's abundance once bestowed on me;
I dwell in poverty
So dire, my words are all afraid to flow.
I fain would imitate some men I see,
Who, moved by shame, dissimulate their woe:
With joyous face I go,
While in my heart I melt with misery.

The next episode is the decease of the youthful friend
of Beatrice. Close upon it ensues a new love.

Riding along one day, with burdened breast,
Upon a road that cost me many a frown,
I met with Love, who journeyed toward the town,
In habit like a pilgrim lightly drest.
His look was that of some one sore distressed;
He seemed a monarch who had lost his crown,
As sighing mournfully he came adown,
With face, to shun remark, netherward prest.
Beholding me, he called to me by name.
"I come," he said, "afar from over there,
Where dwelt thy heart, as once I bade it do.
Now here I bring it, new delight to woo."
Then I absorbed of him so great a share,
He disappeared. God knows what he became!

Now comes the climax. "After my return I began to hunt for this lady whom my Lord had named to me on the road of sighs. To make a long story short, I declare that within a little while I had made her my screen to such a degree that exceeding many people talked thereof beyond the bounds of courtesy. And for this reason (that is, because of the exaggerated report which seemed to accuse me of vice) that most gentle one, destroyer of all vices and queen of virtues, passing through a certain place, denied me her very sweet salutation, in which consisted all my happiness."

To this second protective lady Dante surely must have sent poems. For the first screen lady he himself tells us he wrote "certain little things in rime," one of which is included in the *New Life*. To the youthful friend of Beatrice, for whom he composed two elegies after her death, he may very well have addressed a song or two while she was alive. Here, then, is a little group at least one degree nearer than the inaccessible "sixty:" here, nameless and shadowy, to be sure, are three young persons who may with some plausibility claim stray bits of lyric homage from Dante's pen.

Among such creations, ascribed to Dante and presumably authentic, we find one more flower-ballad, *Per una ghirlandetta*, a song with a chorus and three strophes, with which we may end our search, as we began it with the ballad of Violet. It does not mean much, but it fascinates with its strange daintiness and,

above all, with its mystery. If we really knew all about it, I dare say half its charm would be gone.

Chorus

The memory of a garland
Shall always make me sigh
Whene'er I see a flower.

I

One day I saw thee, Lady, wearing
A tiny garland, fresh from Maying;
And over it a fay was faring,
A modest little love-sprite, swaying,
With cunning music saying:
"Whoso shall me espy
Shall praise my Master's power."
*The memory of a garland
Shall always make me sigh
Whene'er I see a flower.*

II

If I, O floweret sweet and fairest,
Come close enough to see thee twining,
"My Lady," I shall say, "thou bearest
My sighs upon thy head reclining."
But then, to prick my pining,
My Lady shall come nigh
New-crowned from Cupid's bower.
*The memory of a garland
Shall always make me sigh
Whene'er I see a flower.*

III

My curious little words to fashion
A ballad out of flowers have striven,
Stealing, to decorate their passion,
A garment once to others given.

I beg thee, then, by Heaven:
What man the song shall try,
Give him thy richest dower.

*The memory of a garland
Shall always make me sigh
Whene'er I see a flower.*

II. MATELDA

WE are invited to enter, in company with Dante, Virgil, and Statius, into the Earthly Paradise, which, as many know, is situated at the top of an enormous mountain — the mountain of Purgatory — on a lonely island in the middle of the great ocean, at that point of the earth's surface which is directly opposite Jerusalem. Christ's atonement was therefore at the antipodes of Adam's sin. It may surprise some to hear that the medieval earth was round; for people nowadays generally imagine that the men of old conceived of their habitation as flat. That is an error: the scholarship of the Middle Ages, following the lead of not a few Greek and Latin authorities, regarded the earth as a perfect sphere, solid and motionless at the centre of a spherical revolving universe. Most of our globe being covered by water, the land (it was believed) was collected together in a three-lobed continent on one quarter of the surface, where it had been pulled up above the aqueous level, at the time of creation, by the united attraction of many stars. Just in the middle of this continent stands Jerusalem; and midway between Jerusalem and the western extremity is Rome, centre of the Occident, which stretches from the Holy Land to the Strait of Gibraltar. At the eastern end, on the furthest

shore of the Orient, the Ganges empties into the sea. Somewhere inside our mundane sphere is the huge cavern of Hell; there, too, was Purgatory, until Dante drew it forth and gave it a more appropriate location on the upper slopes of a sky-scraping peak, fit symbol of the state of the still earthly but heavenward striving soul.

Dante it was, moreover, who fixed the position of the Earthly Paradise on the summit of this mountain; but this geographical innovation did not involve a complete break with tradition, as did his displacement of Purgatory. The locality of the Garden of Eden had always been indefinite: it was vaguely in the East, sometimes on a remote island, sometimes on a well-nigh inaccessible mountain-top. Pious travelers had, however, occasionally succeeded in reaching it. St. Brendan, the hardy navigator, with his monastic crew, had discovered the Isle of the Blest in the Atlantic. Others had espied the sea-girt Eden at the opposite side of the earth, on the island of Ceylon. Some had found the delectable Garden on a distant highland of Asia — three monks, for instance, who, following up a stream on which they had seen floating a branch from a miraculous tree, scaled an eminence a hundred miles high, and were admitted by an angel with a flaming sword to the Earthly Paradise, where, lulled by the music of the spheres and the song of marvelous birds, rapt in contemplation of the Fountain of Youth, the Tree of Knowledge, the Tree of Immortality, the Four Springs, a host of wondrous trees and

flowers, a lake full of singing fishes, they spent seven hundred years which seemed to them less than seven days. The beautiful birds, flowers, trees, and waters are constant features of the Garden of Delight, to which they belong by Biblical authority. Equally Scriptural is the flaming sword, which, nevertheless, is sometimes replaced by a wall of fire. On the other hand, the Bible affords no explicit warrant for the presence of two inhabitants whom medieval legend habitually assigned to Eden: namely, the patriarchs Enoch and Elijah. These godly men, who had been caught up in the flesh, were supposed to be dwelling in the Earthly Paradise, whence, on the Judgment Day, they shall issue forth to combat the Antichrist. Their venerable figures regularly meet the eyes of visitors to the mysterious garden.

To the explorers of Dante's Earthly Paradise, however, they do not appear. Here, again, the poet is an innovator. His Eden of perpetual springtime is a symbol of youthful innocence, the primal state of humanity, a state which the individual man can and should regain by penance. Hence the position of the garden at the summit of the mountain of Purgatory, which represents penitential discipline. Every detail in Dante's Eden being intended to enhance the impression of pure youth, it is evident that the elderly Enoch and Elijah, sinless though they be, would there be out of place; and we hear nothing about them. In their stead we have a new figure, a lovely and loving girl, Matilda, whose closest

analogue in previous legend is a young man who greets the voyagers in St. Brendan's narrative. This maiden, the genius of the spot, is the embodiment of youthfulness and innocent love and mirth; she typifies the joy of living when life is without sin.

Evidently she is both associated with Beatrice and in a way contrasted with her. As, in Christian exegetical tradition, Leah and Rachel, the daughters of Laban the Syrian, are interpreted respectively as the active and the contemplative life, so Matilda stands for the principle of blameless existence here below, while Beatrice symbolizes divine guidance to the life above. The analogy is clearly enough indicated by the poet himself at the point where, just before entering Eden, he has an allegorical dream of a very Matilda-like Leah, who compares her own activity with the introspective repose of her sister. "Two goals," says Dante in his treatise on *Monarchy*, "hath our mysterious Providence set for man's pursuit: namely, the happiness of this life, which consists in the exercise of human virtue, and is represented by the Earthly Paradise; and the happiness of life eternal, which consists in the enjoyment of the divine aspect, whereto human virtue cannot attain without the help of divine light, and which is meant by the Heavenly Paradise. Now, to these happinesses, as to different ends, man must come by different means. For we come to the first by philosophical teachings, when we follow them, acting in accordance with the moral and

intellectual virtues. But to the second we come by spiritual teachings, which transcend human reason, when we follow them, acting in accordance with the theological virtues, Faith, Hope, and Love." Regarded from the standpoint of this passage, however, the allegorical functions of Matilda and Beatrice are not precisely parallel; for the former corresponds to "the happiness of this life," while the latter corresponds, not to "the happiness of life eternal, which consists in the enjoyment of the divine aspect," but to the "spiritual teachings" that lead us to it. Beatrice is certainly the symbol of revelation, of heavenly guidance; like the angels, she is an intermediary between God and man. The "happiness of life eternal," to which she finally conducts Dante, is figured by St. Bernard, the type of intuition, or "enjoyment of the divine aspect." Inasmuch as this joy in the immediate presence of the Lord is the culmination of the poet's spiritual experience, St. Bernard does not appear until the close of the narrative; and that, no doubt, is why Rachel, his exact counterpart, is only mentioned, not seen, in Dante's prophetic dream.

It might be imagined that, as Beatrice stands for the "spiritual teachings" which lead to happiness eternal, so Matilda represents the "philosophical teachings" which guide us to earthly happiness. In that case she would be identical with the lady who, in the *Banquet* and in a number of the unattached lyrics, symbolizes

philosophy — the same lady who weaned Dante's affection away from the departed Beatrice, in the latter chapters of the *New Life*. But, aside from the name Matilda (which in any case is an obstacle), there are several objections to such an identification. In the first place, it is not this maiden, but Virgil, type of reason, who conducts Dante to the Earthly Paradise; not until after he had entered the abode of "the happiness of this life" does he behold her. She does, indeed, conduct him to meet the allegorical procession of the Church, at the centre of which is Beatrice; but that, in the passage of the *Monarchy* above quoted, is not philosophy's office, which is guidance to mundane happiness. The episode probably signifies that religion comes to receive the sinner, who having cleansed himself by discipline, goes, accompanied by purity, to seek for it. One other duty is entrusted to Matilda: she it is who, under the direction of Beatrice, makes Dante and other souls drink first of the river Lethe, which gives forgetfulness of past sin, then of the river Eunoë, which awakens remembrance of past good deeds. It is fairly clear that these two draughts constitute absolution, or restoration of moral cleanness. They follow an extended colloquy which seems to represent the administration, by Beatrice to Dante, of the sacrament of penance, with its three stages of contrition, confession, and satisfaction. Now, it must be remembered that at the basis of the argument is a strict distinction between philosophy and religion; and,

this being the case, it is obvious that philosophy can have no hand in the purely religious rite of absolution; whereas there is no inappropriateness in a revival of the state of innocence by the instrumentality of a figure representing that state.

It is only fair to admit that in the account of the second part of this purification there is a passage which seems to lend itself to the other interpretation. In the middle of the garden is a miraculous perpetual fountain, from which flow, on opposite sides, the two streams, Lethe and Eunoë, just as the Tigris and Euphrates were supposed to start from a single spring. Although this phenomenon has already been described to Dante by Matilda, he is struck with amazement on beholding it, and asks Beatrice for an explanation.

“ O light and glory of the human race,
What flood is this, which floweth from a same
And single source, and self from self doth chase ? ”
“ Now ask,” this answer to my question came,
“ Matilda to explain.” And then replied,
As one who shrinks from undeservèd blame,
The beauteous lady: “ This and more beside
Have I already told; and well I wis,
Such things can Lethe’s waters never hide.”
“ A greater care, perhaps,” said Beatrice,
“ His mental eyes hath darkly clouded o’er;
For care doth memory often make remiss.
But yonder look, where Eunoë doth pour;
Conduct him there, and, as thy habit is,
His half-exhausted faculties restore.”

Matilda's sentence, "this and more beside have I already told," might be taken to refer to the earlier teachings of philosophy, blameless in themselves, but now forgotten in the new light of revelation. It can, however, be understood as referring simply to the previous explanation given by the "beauteous lady," a few cantos before; and Dante's forgetfulness may be due to the inability of his distracted memory to recall things that are good and hopeful — a defect which is about to be remedied by a draught of Eunoë. The occasion of the incident would seem to be a desire to illustrate the doctrine that the obliteration of sad recollections is not sufficient for true happiness, without the restoration of cheerful ones. There remains the phrase, "as thy habit is," which might be interpreted as an indication of foregoing long-continued ministrations of the lady to Dante; but it is just as susceptible of the meaning, "as thou art accustomed to do with all the souls that pass through Eden on their way to Heaven"; and, in fact, Matilda does administer the water of good memory to Statius as well as to Dante.

One more argument, and then we may dismiss the subject. There would be a peculiar fitness in the conception of the poet led back to Beatrice by the selfsame young person who, perhaps unwittingly, had drawn him away from her — or (if it be preferable to deal with the allegorical attributes of these ladies) led back to "spiritual teachings" by those "philosophical teach-

ings" whose charm had lured him away from complete absorption in the spiritual. It is noteworthy that the name *Matelda*, or *Matilda*, occurs, for the first, last, and only time, in the short speech of Beatrice recently cited: "Now ask Matilda to explain." Probably this use of the name points to a certain intimacy between the two real ladies; and in the narrative of the later love in the *New Life* we have some evidence of at least an acquaintance between Beatrice and the lady who came to symbolize philosophy. It may be added, in passing, that in the whole *Divine Comedy* the only mention of Dante's own name is made by Beatrice, a few cantos earlier. Now, whatever comfort the theory under discussion may derive from this consideration is dispelled by the severe reproaches addressed to the poet by Beatrice, in the presence of Matilda, for his infatuation with the philosophical lady. It is hardly conceivable that "the most gentle one," who is evidently in perfect accord with the "beauteous lady," should, to her face, disparage the latter. Here is her first reference to the alienating influence:

"When I from flesh to spirit rose above,
And comeliness and virtue in me grew,
Less dear was I to him, cooler his love;
His steps he turned upon a road untrue,
And chased deceptive images of good,
Which promise much, but never pay their due."

Once more referring to her own death, and this time addressing Dante, she touches again on the same theme:

“ When wounded first by life’s inconstancy,
Seeing that I was constant evermore,
Thou shouldst have spread thy pinions after me,
Thou shouldst have suffered naught thy wings to lower
To wait for further hurt — nor little maid
Nor other vanity so quickly o’er.”

“ Little maid,” or *pargoletta*, is an epithet bestowed more than once by Dante on the philosophical lady, and its use here by Beatrice is evidently intended to be specific. Scarcely could we picture her speaking thus, if the “ little maid ” were the helpful lady at Dante’s side.

Having convinced ourselves that Matilda does not signify philosophy, and consequently does signify what she seems to mean, youthful innocence or the fresh life of blameless activity, we may pass from her allegorical purpose to the lady herself, as she comes to meet us in the Garden of Eden. Dante, Virgil, and Statius, who have spent the night on the stairway between Purgatory and the Earthly Paradise, enter shortly after sunrise this realm of delight. I quote now from Longfellow’s unrimed translation of the *Divine Comedy*:

Eager already to search in and round
The heavenly forest, dense and living-green,
Which tempered to the eyes the new-born day,
Withouten more delay I left the bank,
Taking the level country slowly, slowly
Over the soil that everywhere breathes fragrance.
A softly-breathing air, that no mutation

Had in itself, upon the forehead smote me
No heavier blow than of a gentle wind,
Whereat the branches, lightly tremulous,
Did all of them bow downward toward that side
Where its first shadow casts the Holy Mountain;
Yet not from their upright position swayed
So that the little birds upon their tops
Should leave the practice of each art of theirs;
But with full ravishment the hours of prime,
Singing, received they in the midst of leaves,
That ever bore a burden to their rhymes,
Such as from branch to branch goes gathering on
Through the pine forest on the shore of Chiassi,
When Eolus unlooses the Sirocco.
Already my slow steps had carried me
Into the ancient wood so far that I
Could not perceive where I had entered it.
And lo! my further course a stream cut off,
Which tow'rd the left hand with its little waves
Bent down the grass that on its margin sprang.
All waters that on earth most limpid are
Would seem to have within themselves some mixture
Compared with that, which nothing doth conceal,
Although it moves on with a brown, brown current
Under the shade perpetual, that never
Ray of the sun lets in, nor of the moon.
With feet I stayed, and with mine eyes I passed
Beyond the rivulet, to look upon
The great variety of the fresh May.
And there appeared to me (even as appears

Suddenly something that doth turn aside
Through very wonder every other thought)
A lady all alone, who went along
Singing and culling floweret after floweret,
With which her pathway was all painted over.
“ Ah, beauteous lady, who in rays of love
Dost warm thyself, if I may trust to looks,
Which the heart’s witnesses are wont to be,
May the desire come unto thee to draw
Near to this river’s bank,” I said to her,
“ So much that I may hear what thou art singing.
Thou makest me remember where and what
Proserpina that moment was when lost
Her mother her, and she herself the Spring.”
As turns herself, with feet together pressed
And to the ground, a lady who is dancing,
And hardly puts one foot before the other,
On the vermilion and the yellow flowerets
She turned towards me, not in other wise
Than maiden who her modest eyes casts down;
And my entreaties made to be content,
So near approaching, that the dulcet sound
Came unto me together with its meaning.
As soon as she was where the grasses are
Bathed by the waters of the beauteous river,
To lift her eyes she granted me the boon.
I do not think there shone so great a light
Under the lids of Venus, when transfixed
By her own son, beyond his usual custom!
Erect upon the other bank she smiled,

Bearing full many colours in her hands,
Which that high land produces without seed.
Apart three paces did the river make us;
But Hellespont, where Xerxes passed across,
(A curb still to all human arrogance,)
More hatred from Leander did not suffer
For rolling between Sestos and Abydos,
Than that from me, because it oped not then.

After describing to them the wonders of Eden, she resumes her song and leads the poets beside the stream.

Singing like unto an enamoured lady,
She, with the ending of her words, continued:
“ *Beati quorum tecta sunt peccata.* ”
And even as Nymphs, that wandered all alone
Among the sylvan shadows, sedulous
One to avoid and one to see the sun,
She then against the stream moved onward, going
Along the banks, and I abreast of her,
Her little steps with little steps attending.
Between her steps and mine were not a hundred,
When equally the margins gave a turn,
In such a way that to the East I faced.
Nor even thus our way continued far
Before the lady wholly turned herself
Unto me, saying, “ Brother, look and listen! ”

Then it is that the pageant of the Church approaches.

What strikes one most in all this passage is the vernal atmosphere, the merging of the lady into the springtime,

or rather, perhaps, the embodiment of springtime in the lady. Does this give us any clue to her identity? No doubt she is a real person: Dante's allegorical figures are habitually drawn from reality. Is there, among the damsels sung in our poet's lyric verse, any one endowed with such springlike attributes? Our minds turn at once to the flower-ballads previously cited, to Violet and the maiden of the garland. However, in the list of poems sometimes ascribed to Dante there is another ballad still more suggestive of our "beauteous lady." Here are the refrain and the first of the three strophes:

Chorus

O rosebud fresh and new,
O springtime full of charm,
On river-bank and farm
In ever joyous song
Thy praise I pass along
To all the wood.

I

O be thy perfect praise
Gladly renewed by all,
By singers great and small,
O'er all the country ways!
May birds thy fame recall,
Each in his special tongue
(Let day be old or young)
On tree-tops green and tall!

Since now the time is come,
The fitting time of spring,
Let everybody sing
The glory of thy throne;
For thou art Heaven's own,
So sweet and good.

This rather mediocre poem is doubtless not by Dante, but it is probably connected with him, nevertheless. It may be observed that in the second line the lady is called "Springtime," *Primavera*. Now, among Dante's female acquaintances, as we happen to know, there was one who bore that nickname; she was, for a while, the sweetheart of his first friend, Guido Cavalcanti, and her real name was Giovanna or Vanna, which is our Joan. For this reason it has been conjectured that Cavalcanti wrote the ballad—a conjecture plausible enough, though far from sure. "Springtime" may, indeed, in this verse, be merely an epithet of general application, like the "rosebud" of the first line. "Rose" is always a favorite name for one's beloved, both in literary and in popular song. It occurs, for instance, in a famous and much-discussed poem, one of the early examples of Italian versification, the *Rosa fresca aulentissima*, which consists of a burlesque dialogue, perhaps a student's parody of the fashionable amatory colloquy:

Rose, fresh and odoriferous, that quick in spring appearest,
The married and the single folk—all people hold thee
dearest.

From raging flames now rescue me, if humble prayer thou
hearest!

For thee by day and night I sadly pine,
Thinking of thee alone, O lady mine!

The vernal note is inherent in the dance-song from the beginning, as dances are especially connected with spring. It is not, however, peculiar to this type of verse, but is apt to pervade love-poetry of all kinds. There is, of course, not only a traditional, but also a natural, spontaneous bond between love and springtide, the mating season. In the extant poetry of southern France, this association, which has already become a literary convention, usually confines itself, in the courtly love-lyric, to a more or less perfunctory mention of flowers and birds in the opening stanza. Here is a pretty example from the Provençal poet Arnaut de Marueilh, translated by Justin H. Smith:

Fair to me is April, bearing
Winds that o'er me softly blow, —
Nightingales their music airing
While the stars serenely glow;
All the birds, as they have power,
While the dews of morning wait,
Sing of joy in sky or bower,
Each consorting with his mate.

The early Italian poets, continuing the French tradition, sometimes developed the spring theme with considerable freedom. For instance, Rinaldo d'Aquino, one of

the songsters of Emperor Frederick's group, paid tribute to the new season thus:

When woods rejoice
And banks are seen
Fresh flowering,
The birds give voice
Within the green,
Their song to sing
To greet the spring,
Which cometh now
With beaming brow
Fresh garlanded:
Now grief is sped
And care takes wing.

The breath of lawns,
The voice of birds
Move me to love.
When daylight dawns,
I hear soft words,
New airs, above,
From thrush and dove;
And welcoming
The joyous spring,
They still prolong
The strife of song
Through all the grove.

In the following lines, his colleague, Giacomino Pugliese, beginning in the same joyous tone, ends in a plaintive key:

When flowers once more are seen
In meadows, by the stream,
And, chirping in the green,
The merry birdlets seem
To greet the spring with glee,
Then I, with joyous mien,
Carol right cheerily,
The woes of love to screen;
For lovers still do languish piteously.

Returning to Cavalcanti's Primavera, let us recall Dante's exquisite sonnet often called, after Rossetti, the "Boat of Love," a poetic fancy that seems to perpetuate the evanescent spring dreams of amorous youth:

Guido, I wish that Lapo, thou, and I
Were put aboard a boat by magic art,
Which wafted by the winds, without a chart,
Obedient to our wish, should seaward fly;
And ne'er a storm nor unpropitious sky
Should tear our little company apart,
But, living always with a single heart,
Our joy in one another should not die.
To us I wish the wizard kind would add
My Lady Vanna, Lady Lagia, too,
And her who doth on number thirty dwell,
With love the only tale we had to tell!
I wish that they should ne'er their coming rue,
As I believe that we should ne'er be sad!

The mysterious "number thirty," under which is hidden the identity of Dante's own sweetheart, we shall

have to investigate later on. In the list of ladies, Vanna (surnamed Primavera) comes first, as is natural enough, since the author is addressing her lover. But there is another poem in which Vanna precedes Beatrice without quite the same reason, Guido not being mentioned in the verses. The sonnet in question is in the *New Life*, preceded by a curious introduction, to which the study of Beatrice will ere long compel us to revert. For the present, let it suffice to note Dante's strange insistence on the conceit that this lady was foreordained to walk before Beatrice, even as John the Baptist came before Christ, and that this predestination is indicated by her very nickname, *Primavera*, which suggests *prima verrà*, "she shall come first." The sonnet, Dante tells us, was addressed to Guido, which would appear to be a sufficient explanation of Giovanna's precedence; but the poet preferred to give it a mystic significance. Of the personality of this lady we know nothing — except that perhaps her father's name was Philip.

I felt awakening within my breast
A loving spirit that was slumbering,
And Love I saw arrive from distant quest,
So joyous that he seemed another thing.
"In praise of me," he cried, "now do thy best!"
And every word he spake did laugh and sing.
Now when my Lord so gayly me address,
I lookt to see whence he had taken wing:
Vanna with Bice coming did I see

Toward the spot where I expectant stood,
One miracle the other close behind;
And as my memory reports to me,
“*Springtime* is this,” declared my Master good,
“The other, *Love*, who ’s like to me in kind.”

In this Vanna we seem to find the characteristics required for a possible identification with the “beauteous lady” of the Earthly Paradise. I say “possible,” because our ignorance is such that all evidence is of necessity tenuous, and we have no better guide than varying shades of likelihood. Vanna was associated, both in life and in the poet’s fancy, with Beatrice. He thought of her as preceding the “most gentle one,” as John the Baptist prepared the way of the Lord, and as the lady of Eden appeared to Dante in the garden before Beatrice and led the way to her. Moreover, she embodies in her person and expresses in her name the vernal quality that the “beauteous lady” personifies. To be sure, this lady is certainly a departed spirit, and we do not know that Vanna was dead in 1300, the year of the mystic journey described in the *Divine Comedy*; but, on the other hand, we are not sure that she was not. And, as I have said, we are merely guessing.

There is, however, one element of implausibility in our guess, a flaw that would have been immediately apparent, had I, in the preceding argument, mentioned the “beauteous lady” by name. She is called *Matelda*, not Vanna nor Primavera. Her name occurs, indeed,

only once; but once is enough. The name is there, and we cannot escape from it. And as yet no ingenuity has succeeded in tracing any connection between *Matelda* and either of the names of Cavalcanti's sweetheart. Moreover, Dante apparently knew Giovanna so well that he should have recognized her, even in the Earthly Paradise; whereas, in his account of his meeting with the "beauteous lady," there is no trace of recognition. We must, therefore, reluctantly give up this trail and look elsewhere. Unhappily we shall discover no other clue that promises so well.

The early commentators on the *Divine Comedy*, basing their identification of the keeper of Eden on her name alone, declared that she is a certain Grand Countess Matilda, an important figure in the earlier annals of Tuscany; and a few modern interpreters follow their course. But the Countess, an august, almost masculine personage, whose mature years rather than her youth were stamped on tradition, has nothing but her name in common with our lady; and the name, while it may suffice to exclude a candidate, should count for little or nothing in admitting one, unless supported by manifest fitness. For Dante presumably knew many a Matilda totally unknown to us, while some medieval Matildas with whom we are acquainted were surely outside his ken. This objection applies, but not in the same measure, to the attempt made, by several eminent scholars of our day, to find Dante's Matilda in the person of one

or another nun of that name. One pious lady in particular, St. Mechteldis of Hackeborn, has recently claimed much attention, because of a recorded vision of hers, which at some points reminds one of Dante's portrayal of Purgatory and the Earthly Paradise. No such resemblance, however, and no similarity of name should blind us to the evident impropriety of picturing a nun as our poet pictures his Matilda:

Ah, beauteous lady, who in rays of love

Dost warm thyself . . .

I do not think there shone so great a light

Under the lids of Venus . . .

Furthermore, Dante's lady is evidently a creature of the active life, of which Leah is the recognized type; and a nun could appropriately symbolize no other life than that of contemplation. One gathers, too, from an unprejudiced reading of the poem, the impression that Matilda is a contemporary and probably a companion of Beatrice, rather than some remote character taken from a book. Singing, picking flowers beside a stream, dancing as she turns, she suggests the ballad ladies we have met, far more than a Grand Countess or a nun.

Who knows whether there may not have been a Matilda, or several Matildas, in Dante's lost poem which enumerated "the sixty most beautiful ladies of the city," the *serventese* he wrote when he was paying homage to the lady who sat in church midway between himself and Beatrice? It is with that youthful phase of his

life, not with his more serious and bookish years, that we instinctively associate the blithesome maiden of the delectable garden. In a half dozen of the earlier chapters of the *New Life* we have already found three young ladies, other than Beatrice, to whom Dante did poetic service. Now, one of the three — the second — possesses at least one qualification for the office of prototype of the “beauteous lady”: she was certainly dead before 1300. Besides, she sometimes consorted with Beatrice. Fortunately, perhaps, for our hypothesis, we are ignorant of her name; but her character, as described by Dante, is not different from that of his Matilda. On the other hand, one of the objections urged against Giovanna is valid also in her case: it is not apparent why Dante should not have recognized her in the Garden of Eden, as he would seem to have known her fairly well. To be sure, she had died some fifteen years before that encounter on the mystic journey, her death having occurred just before the meeting with Love which led to the transfer of Dante’s heart from the first screen lady to the second, and not long after the departure of the first from Florence.

“After the departure of this gentle lady, it was the pleasure of the Lord of angels to call to his glory a youthful lady of right gentle aspect, who was very gracious in the aforesaid city. Her body did I see lying without the soul, in the midst of many ladies, who were weeping very piteously. Then, remembering that

formerly I had seen her in company with that most gentle one [Beatrice], I could not restrain some tears; but rather, weeping, I resolved to write some words concerning her death in compensation for my having sometimes seen her with my lady. And to this I made some allusion in the last part of the words I wrote of her, as is clearly apparent to one who understands. And then I wrote these two sonnets, the first of which begins ‘*Piangete amanti*’; the second, ‘*Morte villana.*’ ”

Let us consider first the latter poem, which, the author has notified us, contains at the end a covert reference to the companionship of this lady with Beatrice. This can signify only that some of the closing lines have a double meaning, for which we must look with particular care. Here is the poem, a *sonetto rinterzato*:

O mean, ungentle Death, sweet pity's foe,
Old ancestor of woe,
Inevitable sentence, and malign!
Since thou hast stricken so this heart of mine
That I must ever pine,
Blame thee I must, till tongue shall weary grow.
Would I make thee for mercy begging go,
To all the world I'd show
That one supremely sinful sin of thine;
Not that the world hath seen thereof no sign,
But rather to incline
To wrath all those the food of Love who know.
By thee our life is robbed of courtesy

And all the goodness we to woman trace;
 Youth's joyous face
 Hath lost its loving charm because of thee.
 I will not tell who may this lady be,
 Save by her virtues known in every place.
 Unless one merit grace,
 One never must expect such company.

The phrases "joyous youth," *gaia gioventute*, and "loving charm," *amorosa leggiadria*, are exactly those one would choose to describe Dante's Matilda. As to the mysterious "allusion in the last part of the words," we who have been forewarned can see that while the last two lines,

Unless one merit grace,
 One never must expect such company,

obviously mean "one who deserves not salvation must never hope to see this maiden again," they are susceptible also of the interpretation, "one who is undeserving of grace from a lady must not expect to have such company as this damsel enjoyed" — namely, the company of Beatrice. The Italian word *salute*, which I have translated "grace," means both "salvation" and "salutation"; and Dante's chief happiness, as he tells us, consisted in the salutation of Beatrice, which he presently forfeited by his indiscreet attentions to another lady. "Such company" is, in the original, *sua compagnia*, which means "her company": that is, either

“the companionship of her” or “the companionship which she had.”

Now, I do not believe that this elaborate play on words was in the author's mind when he composed the verses. It was one of the many afterthoughts which the maturer Dante, collecting and explaining his youthful productions, read into them. As originally conceived, the poem was probably a simple elegy on the passing of a young favorite of Florentine society. Such mourning verse constituted a distinct type, called in Italian *compianto*, “complaint,” in Provençal *planh*, “plaint.” The loss lamented was usually that of one's beloved or of a patron or sovereign. Dante's friend, Cino da Pistoia, wrote *compianti* on the death of Beatrice and of Emperor Henry VII. In Provençal we find more than one touching elegy on the death of Richard I of England. The early Italian school offers several good specimens of the *genre* — for instance, this bit of Giacomino Pugliese, one of the so-called Sicilian group:

Death, why dost thou afflict me with such pain,
Stealing my love, and with her all my mirth ?
The flower of earthly beauty hast thou slain;
Now have I naught to live for, here on earth.
Discourteous Death, to treat my pleading so!
Thou'st parted lovers, frozen pleasure's glow,
Till all is sad.
My former gayety is turned to woe,
For thou hast killed all comfort here below,
Which once I had.

Pleasure and sport and laughter once I knew
Better by far than any other knight;
But when my lady forth to Heaven flew,
Sweet hope went with her, and forsook me quite.
Grief have I still, and endless tears and sighs;
Society and sport and song and prize
Are all forbid.
No more I see her at my coming rise,
No more she turns upon me her sweet eyes,
As once she did.

Going back to the "youthful lady of right gentle aspect, who was very gracious in the aforesaid city," let us now hear the first of the two elegies which Dante composed on her death. And on taking leave of this maiden, so full of "joyous youth" and "loving charm," let us venture, for once, to call her Matilda.

Ye lovers, sigh! for Love, our Master, sighs.
Now learn what grief hath banisht all his glee:
Love heareth ladies calling piteously,
Their bitter pain revealing thro' their eyes.
Discourteous Death has set in cruel wise
Upon a noble heart his stern decree,
Destroying what in noble ladies we,
Beside their good repute, on earth do prize.
What honor Love bestowed on her, now guess!
I saw his very self lamenting there
Over the charming form that lifeless lay,
Lifting his mournful gaze to Heaven away,
Which had become the gentle soul's repair
That once was queen of all in joyousness.

III. PIETRA

IN discussing the problem of Dante's Matilda, the "beauteous lady" of the Earthly Paradise, we were obliged to begin our investigation by determining her allegorical significance, which, for the understanding and appreciation of the poem, is vastly more important than her literal but obscure self. Very much the same thing may be said of the other leading figures in the *Divine Comedy*. Of the flesh-and-blood Beatrice we know next to nothing; in fact, we are somewhat in doubt whether Boccaccio was right in identifying her with Beatrice Portinari, and we are not quite certain even that her name was really Beatrice. What we do know is that in the poet's mystic journey she symbolizes revelation, or "spiritual teachings," an indispensable guide to Heaven. For this purpose any other good and beautiful lady, sufficiently idealized, would have served as well. Cato of Utica and St. Bernard of Clairvaux are well-known characters and excellent examples, respectively, of free will and intuition; but it is easily conceivable that Dante should, without changing the tenor of his story, have chosen different representatives of these qualities; whereas the narrative would not have been what it is if free will and intuition had not been figured in some fashion. For his Virgil, the poet imag-

ined a distinct and living personality, quite different from the Augustan author as we know him, but in accord with the medieval conception of the great sage of antiquity. If, however, Dante had chosen to substitute Aristotle for Virgil as the type of reason or human understanding, the *Divine Comedy*, though at some points less attractive, would have been essentially the same; while it could not have proceeded at all without some appropriate embodiment of reason, to conduct the traveler through Hell and Purgatory.

In expounding one of his own odes in his *Banquet*, Dante, following St. Thomas Aquinas, defines four modes of interpretation, the literal, the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogical. With the two latter we need not concern ourselves, but it will be interesting to hear what he has to say of allegory. "I declare that, as was told in the first chapter, this exposition should be literal and allegorical. And to make this intelligible, it must be known that writings can be understood and must be explained, for the most part, in four senses. One is called *literal*, and this is the one that does not extend beyond the letter itself. The next is called *allegorical*, and this is the one that is concealed beneath the mantle of these fables, being a truth hidden under pretty fiction; as when Ovid says that Orpheus with his lyre tamed wild beasts and made trees and stones come to him: which means that the wise man, with the instrument of his voice, makes cruel hearts tame and humble, and

draws to his will those who have no life of knowledge and of art, since those who have no rational life are as stones. And why this concealment was invented by the sages, shall be shown in the next-to-last book. To be sure, the theologians take this sense differently from the poets; but inasmuch as it is my intention to follow the method of the poets, I shall take the allegorical sense as the poets use it." In poetry, then, the literal sense may be, and often is, pure fiction; whereas the allegorical meaning, which is the essential one, must be true. So it is also, centuries later, in the prose of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. So, in the Middle Ages, Ovid's poem of the *Metamorphoses* was interpreted.

In the literature of our day, allegory has gone out of style. Symbolism still lingers in sculpture, especially in cemeteries and in public monuments; it is frequent in cartoons and posters: in painting it has an occasional belated devotee. It remains, of course, in religious service and, to a considerable extent, in ecclesiastical architecture; and it has recently taken a new lease of life in the pageant and the morality play. In other forms of writing, however, if attempted on any but the smallest scale, it usually fails to please; and few authors care to make the trial. Furthermore, we think of it as something extremely artificial, a mere technical device. It was not thus in Dante's time. Then allegory appeared spontaneous, because symbolism was a fundamental mode of thought, forming the basis of man's

conception of the world. The universe was full of mystic correspondences, which disclosed themselves in astronomy, in zoölogy, in history, in names and numbers.

Of numbers and names we shall have occasion to discourse in treating of Beatrice. For a specimen of allegorical interpretation of secular history, we may turn to another passage of Dante's *Banquet*, where the author reveals the inner significance of the life of Martia, wife of Cato. "By which Martia," says Dante, "is meant the noble Soul; and we may thus reduce the figure to truth. Martia was a maiden, and in that state signifies Adolescence; then she came to Cato, and in that state signifies Youth. At that time she bore children, by whom are signified the virtues which I have already declared to befit the young. And she parted from Cato and wedded Hortensius, whereby is meant that Youth departed and Maturity came. She bore children also unto him; by whom are signified the virtues which I have already declared to suit Maturity. Hortensius died, whereby is meant the end of Maturity; and Martia having become a widow (by which widowhood is signified Age) went back at the beginning of her widowhood to Cato, whereby is meant that the noble Soul at the beginning of old age returns to God. . . . And Martia saith: 'Two reasons move me One is that after me it may be said that I died the wife of Cato. The other is that after me it may be said that thou didst not drive me forth, but didst give me in marriage

kindly.' By these two reasons the noble Soul is moved: it wishes to depart from this life as the bride of God, and it wishes to show that God was pleased at its creation. O ill-starred and ill-born creatures, who wish rather to depart from this life under the name of Hortensius than under that of Cato!"

Still another part of the *Banquet* offers an illustration of astronomical symbolism. "We must," affirms the author, "take into consideration a comparison which exists between the order of the heavens and that of the sciences. Now, as has been told above, the seven skies nearest to us are those of the planets; then there are two movable heavens above these and one quiet heaven above all. To the first seven correspond the seven sciences of the Trivium and of the Quadrivium; to wit, Grammar, Dialectics, Rhetoric, Arithmetic, Music, Geometry, and Astrology. To the eighth sphere, namely the starry one, correspond Natural Science, which is called Physics, and the primal science, which is called Metaphysics; to the ninth corresponds Moral Science; and to the still heaven corresponds Divine Science, which is known as Theology. And the reason why this is so must be briefly looked into. I say that the heaven of the Moon is likened to Grammar, because it is comparable to it. For, if we rightly look at the Moon, we see that two things are peculiar to it, not being seen in the other stars: one is the shade that is in it, which is nothing but rarity in its body, which rarity cannot stop and

refract the sun's rays as the other parts do; the other is the variation of its luminousness, for now it shines on one side, now on the other, according as the Sun faces it. And these same two properties hath Grammar; for, because of its immensity, the rays of reason are not stopped by it altogether, especially in the matter of words; and it shines now here, now there, in so far as certain words, certain declensions, certain constructions are in use, which formerly did not exist, and many once existed which shall exist again, as Horace saith at the beginning of his *Poetics*, when he saith: 'Many words shall be born again, which once have fallen.' " And so on, at some length, for the other heavens and the other sciences.

With nature and life so full of mysterious relations, it was not strange that art should be filled with symbols; and so it came to be. Allegorical creation, in the main, followed allegorical interpretation, and that (as far as literature is concerned) went back to the ancient Greeks and Hebrews, the former explaining the myths of Homer, the latter expounding their own religious writings. Christian theology, under both Greek and Jewish influence, developed a threefold, then a fourfold system of Biblical exegesis, the most important feature of which was the elaborate exposition of the Old Testament as a detailed allegorical prophecy of the New. That was not all. Imitating the later Greek rationalization of Homeric mythology, Latin commentators applied a similar

method to Virgil and Ovid, who came in the Middle Ages to be regarded as the great pagan masters of allegory. Naturally enough, under such inspiration a symbolic style of writing was adopted, first in religious compositions, later in secular literature. In the course of the thirteenth century poetic allegory was given an enormous vogue by the unrivaled success of the Old French *Romance of the Rose*, which was translated into various languages. An English version of it was made by Chaucer. An extremely clever Italian adaptation, called *Il Fiore*, in the form of a sonnet sequence, is the work of a certain Durante, whom a few scholars would identify with Dante Alighieri.

Incontestably, Dante was the greatest of all creators of allegory. Next to him we may, perhaps, put John Bunyan. When we compare attentively the work of these two masters, we perceive that their habitual methods are diverse: for Bunyan starts with a general concept, which he invests with a bodily form and an obviously descriptive name, such as Prudence or Giant Despair; whereas Dante selects a notable example of the quality he wishes to symbolize, and makes that individual stand for the quality itself. In other words, Bunyan proceeds from the abstract to the concrete, Dante from the concrete to the abstract. Although the former mode is the commoner among allegorists, the latter is more capable of lending reality to the narration. We have seen how, to personify reason, Dante uses the

familiar figure of Virgil, whom every schoolboy knew, and whom medieval scholarship looked upon as the wisest man among the ancients. As a symbol of revelation, he employs the character of Beatrice, long conceived and celebrated by him as a miracle on earth, a heavenly creature, a representative of the divine intelligence. Cato, who slew himself rather than submit to the usurping Cæsar, is transformed into the type of free will. Intuition, or direct perception of God, is figured by St. Bernard, the famous mystic, who discoursed on the joys of contemplation. Minos, pagan judge of the lower world, apparently embodies the guilty conscience. Despair takes corporeal form in Medusa. The ill-begotten Minotaur, part man and part bull, serves as the epitome of bestial violence. Cerberus, with his three mouths, becomes a symbol of gluttony. By pursuing this course, Dante is able to take advantage of all our previous associations with the personages he presents, and thus to abridge description while gaining in distinctness and vitality. We must remember what his habit is, when trying to work out some problems which he has left us without a visible clue.

In the foregoing remarks, the words *allegory* and *symbol* have occurred repeatedly side by side. In fact, symbolism and allegory are often regarded as the same thing; or, at least, the two terms are frequently used indiscriminately. Nevertheless, one vaguely feels a shade of diversity; and reflection convinces us that,

even if no tangible distinction exists, it would be convenient to make one. How shall the two words, or the two things, be differentiated? Allegory is always symbolical; but it is possible to use symbols — as one does, for instance, in a metaphor — without creating an allegory. My colleague, Professor Neilson, has solved the difficulty by means of an ingenious definition: allegory, according to him, is “sustained” or “organized” or “patterned” symbolism: it is the consecutive, systematic use of fixed symbols. The more we consider this definition, the more serviceable and satisfactory we find it. Let us understand *symbolism*, then, as the broader term, which includes allegory on the one hand, and, on the other, the employment of incidental figures of speech or changing symbols. Holding to this distinction, we shall call, for example, Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande* a piece of symbolistic art, while the *Divina Commedia* shall be accepted as a true allegory.

Among Dante's lyric poems we shall perhaps find occasion to apply this principle of differentiation. Many of these, to be sure, are neither allegorical nor symbolical — or they are symbolical only in a moderate use of metaphor and in their frequent personification of Love: such are a couple of moral disquisitions in rime, certain verses addressed to male friends, a few elegies, and some early sonnets and ballads in praise of young Beatrice and other maidens. There are, however, two groups of lyrics which invite a “mystical” interpreta-

tion: the first consists of poems written apparently for a "gentle lady," but truly, as the author assures us in his *Banquet*, composed in honor of philosophy; the second comprises those having to do with a youthful but unresponsive person whom the poet calls *Pietra*, or "Stone," to indicate her hardness. The former group, which I shall discuss later, is, I think, in the main really allegorical; by which I mean that the odes which compose it, taken together, show a development of two or three constant symbols, Love representing study and the beloved standing for philosophy.

The second group, made up of a few superbly artistic lyrics, most of them full of passion and of mystery, is excessively hard to interpret. In the first place, we do not know exactly how many pieces should be included in it. Let us look first at those which are sure. For two poems, which contain at fixed places in every stanza the word *pietra*, there is no question: these form the nucleus of the series, and furnish a basis of classification. They are Dante's first and second *sestine*, *Al poco giorno ed al gran cerchio d'ombra* and *Amor tu vedi ben che questa donna*. To these may be confidently added a third, the *canzone*, *Io son venuto al punto della rota*, which has the word *pietra* in rime with itself at the end of the first strophe. This *canzone*, like the first *sestina* and probably the second, draws its inspiration from the winter season, and suggests the contrast between the outer cold and the fire of passion within.

This theme, which is much more fully developed in the *canzone* than in either *sestina*, was not entirely new. It had been touched upon by at least four Provençal troubadours; and among them is the writer whom Dante esteemed highest of all poets in the vulgar tongue, Arnaut Daniel, the inventor of the *sestina*. Concerning Arnaut, he puts into the mouth of Guido Guinizelli, whom he meets in Purgatory, these words: "O brother, the spirit I am pointing out to thee with my finger was a better forger than I of the mother speech. Everything he surpassed — verses of love and prose of romances; so let fools chatter, who think the bard of Limousin [Giraut de Bornelh] excels him. To report rather than to truth they turn their faces, and thus fix their opinion before they listen to art or to reason." This Arnaut, who is cited four times by Dante in his treatise on composition in the vernacular, offers repeated examples of the contrast of love and winter; but never does he in the least approach the masterly treatment exhibited in the work of his admirer.

The second *sestina*, *Amor tu vedi ben che questa donna*, though undoubtedly a "Pietra" poem, is quite different from the other two. Made up of miscellaneous amatory conceits, it seems more like a clever metrical exercise than the working out of an idea. Its name, though indicative enough of complexity, is misleading: for while the song always goes under the title of "*sestina*" or "double *sestina*," it is not really a *sestina* at all,

but rather an example of the type known in Provence as a *dictatz capcaudatz*, or "head-tailed composition," so called because the tail of one stanza becomes the head of the next. With the *sestina*, however, Dante's poem has in common the total absence of rimes and the repetition of end-words according to a fixed and intricate pattern. Each stanza consists of twelve lines; and in these twelve lines, in all five stanzas and the envoy, there are only five end-words, three of which are repeated within the strophe, one of them (a different one for each strophe) occurring in it six times. As we pass from stanza to stanza, the last end-word of the preceding strophe becomes the first of the next strophe, and all the others are pushed down one place. It is obvious that, with such an elaborate medium as this, even Dante's genius could say but little. Although all three of the *Pietra* poems I have mentioned are constructed on uncommonly difficult plans, and show the highest degree of technical skill, this composition, which has the hardest scheme of all, is the only one in which the difficulty is obvious to the reader. For that reason, no doubt, the author's ingenuity is more immediately manifest. The poem runs something like this:

I

O Love, thou plainly canst perceive, this queen
Cares nothing for thy power at any time —
Thy power, which other fair ones call their queen!
And when this lady saw she was my queen,

Beholding in my face thine amorous light,
She made herself of cruelty the queen.
No longer doth her heart befit a queen,
But some wild beast, whose heart to love is cold;
For always, be the season hot or cold,
She governs me as if she were a queen
Not flesh and blood, but carved in beauteous stone
By one whose hand is best at carving stone.

II

And I, in faith to thee more firm than stone
For beauty's sake (the beauty of a queen),
Conceal the wound inflicted by a stone
With which thou struckest me, as 't were a stone
Which had thy way encumbered many a time.
The blow hath reached my heart, which now is stone;
And ne'er hath mortal found a magic stone
Which from the solar power or solar light
Had got such wondrous property or light
That it could aught avail against this stone
Which bringeth me, with its inhuman cold,
To such a pass that death will turn me cold.

III

Thou knowest, Lord, that in the freezing cold
The hardening water turns to crystal stone
Yonder to northward, where the world is cold,
And atmosphere becomes a thing of cold
And so descends that water rules as queen
(In yonder land), congealing with the cold.
E'en thus, confronted with that visage cold,

My blood is icy frozen all the time.
That thought which shortens most my earthly time
Is turned within my eyes to humor cold,
And there by beauty's ray is brought to light,
Where entered first that beauty's cruel light.

IV

Of every charm there shines in her the light;
Yet every cruelty doth send its cold
Into her heart, which never knew thy light.
Her beauty, when I see her, so doth light
Mine eyes that I behold her in a stone,
In everything on which I turn my light.
There cometh from her eyes so fair a light
That I can look upon no other queen.
Ah! would that she might be a clement queen
To me, who pray, in darkness and in light,
For time to do her service — place and time!
For that alone would I live out my time.

V

Therefore, O Power, which older art than time,
Older than motion, older eke than light,
O pity me, who spend so sad a time!
Now penetrate her heart (indeed 't is time)
And banish thence the homicidal cold
Which cutteth short my life's allotted time.
For if, in such a state, thy winter time
Shall overtake me, then my pretty Stone
Shall see me stretcht within a little stone,

Never to rise until the end of time.

Then I shall see if earth has had a queen

As beautiful as this unfeeling queen.

Envoy

O Song, I carry in my mind a queen

So beautiful, for all she be of stone,

She gives me courage, tho' mankind be cold,

To dare to write, despite the season's cold,

A thing so strange that (by thy constant light!)

It never was conceived at any time.

Both this poem and the first *sestina*, *Al poco giorno ed al gran cerchio d' ombra*, are cited by Dante as his own in his treatise *De Vulgari Eloquentia*. In the first *sestina* we find a form strangely artificial and intricate, to be sure, but so masterfully handled that the author's effort is almost concealed. *Al poco giorno* is a real *sestina*, following the type invented, as I have said, by Arnaut Daniel, and by him used several times. A few other troubadours tried their hand at it, among them one of Italian birth. Then Dante took it up, and in this poem carried it to its highest perfection. Two other *sestine*, manifest imitations of this one, are sometimes printed under Dante's name, though not ascribed to him in any manuscript, and certainly not by him. As far as we know, *Al poco giorno* is the only genuine *sestina* that Dante wrote. Several excellent *sestine* were composed by Petrarch, who in one of them contrasted love and

snow. Since his day, the form has been occasionally but sparingly attempted.

The *sestina* has six stanzas, each of six lines, and a three-line envoy. For the six lines there are six end-words, which are repeated from strophe to strophe in an order that changes according to a set formula. If we represent the arrangement, in a given stanza, as 123456, the sequence in the next stanza will be 615243. The number of words being equal to the number of lines, there is no repetition within the strophe. All six words are incorporated into the three lines of the envoy. The music, we are told, consists of a continuous air running through the stanza, without the repetitions customary in the strophe of the *canzone*, or ode. Our poem starts out with a picture of the winter solstice, the time of short days and long nights. The opening words,

To dwindling day and vast encircling shade
I now have come,

recall a similar beginning by Peire d' Alvernhe,

Anigh short days and evenings long,

and, still more, a wintry introduction by another Provençal poet, Gavaudan:

The longest night and smallest day
Of all the year, we now have reacht.

Here is a translation of Dante's *sestina*. The word *donna*, which in my version of the preceding poem I

rendered by “queen,” I have here turned into “lass,” *donna* being a term of various meanings — “possessor,” “mistress,” “lady,” and “woman.”

I

To dwindling day and vast encircling shade
I now have come, alas! and whitening hills,
When color hath forsook the meadow leaves;
And yet my longing loseth not its green,
So rooted is it in the stubborn stone
Which sentient is and speechful as a lass.

II

Forever chilly stands this curious lass,
As snow unchanging bideth in the shade;
She stirs no more than everlasting stone,
When balmy spring returns and heats the hills
And makes them change their hue from white to green,
Decking them o’er with little flowers and leaves.

III

When that her head is garlanded with leaves,
One cannot think of any other lass;
For golden curls so mingle with the green
That Love is lured to nestle in the shade.
'T is Love that locks me here 'mid little hills
Firmer by far than mortar locketh stone.

IV

Her charms more potent are than magic stone;
She deals a wound incurable by leaves.
Lo! I have fled thro’ plains and over hills,

Attempting to escape from such a lass;
But still her light is never screened with shade
By hillock cast, or wall, or foliage green.

V

I once beheld this damsel garbed in green,
So fair, she would have kindled in a stone
The love I bear unto her very shade.
Ah! were I with her now 'mid grassy leaves,
And would that she were fond as any lass,
Within a field enclosed by lofty hills!

VI

But sooner shall the brooks run up the hills
Than ever vernal wood so moist and green
Shall burn (as oft befalls a pretty lass)
For me, who willingly would sleep in stone
For all my days, and feed upon the leaves,
Merely to see the ground her garments shade.

Envoy

Whene'er the hills project their blackest shade,
Beneath a hopeful green the little lass
Covers it o'er, as stone is hid by leaves.

The third poem that indisputably belongs to the set is the *canzone*, *Io son venuto al punto della rota*, in which the last two lines of the first stanza end in *pietra*. In every strophe of this ode the last verse closes with the same word as the next-to-last; but this word, though identical in form, is in each case slightly differentiated

in sense. Otherwise the stanzas have a normal rime-scheme — *abc abc c deed ff*. One can hardly discuss the Pietra poems without giving special attention to their structure, because in them technical artistry has so conspicuous a share. In this ode, the first nine lines of each strophe contain a beautiful little sketch of some aspect of wintertime: the opening stanza pictures the winter stars; the second describes the clouds, snow, and rain; the third tells of birds and beasts in the cold season, the fourth discourses of vegetable life; the fifth, of the frozen soil. Each of these nine-line sketches is followed by a contrasting four-line glimpse into the poet's heart, unchanging amid the changes of the elements; and this theme receives its final development in the envoy. Petrarch has one *canzone*, *Ne la stagion che il ciel rapido inchina*, built on a similar plan, except that his little pictures represent, not winter, but evening, and the contrast is between dying day and undying love. In the beginning of Dante's ode, as in that of his first *sestina*, the winter solstice is indicated: the time of year when the setting sun, in Capricorn, is face to face with the constellation of Gemini, rising on the eastern horizon; when Venus, at her apogee, is in opposition with the earth and therefore hidden by the sun; when Saturn, the chilly planet, describing its broadest revolution, rises highest overhead — a position in which any one of the seven planets casts but little shadow, because its light descends almost vertically.

I

Now have I reacht that point upon the wheel
When round horizon, which the sun doth hide,
A Geminated heaven doth unfold.
The amorous star her light cannot reveal;
For glaring rays her orbit so bestride,
She seems before her face a veil to hold.
The distant star that fortifies the cold
Shines fully forth on that extended bow
Which lets the seven little shadow cast. —
Yet memory clutcheth fast
Each single thought of love that laid me low —
My cruel memory, harder far than stone
In keeping fixt the effigy of Stone.

II

There rises up from Ethiopia's sand
A foreign wind, which makes the air to weep,
Because the sun is yonder shining bright.
Crossing the sea, it brings a misty band
Of clouds so thick, if naught the sky doth sweep,
They fill this hemisphere and close it tight;
And then they melt, and fall in flakelets white
Of frozen snow, or else in hateful rain,
Whereby the saddened air is moved to tears. —
And Love, who greatly fears
The rising wind, takes up his nets again;
But me he quits not, such a beauteous queen
Was given me to be my cruel queen.

III

Now every bird that followeth the heat
Is fled from Europe's shores, which never lack
The seven chilly stars that make the Wain.
All other birds have stilled their voices sweet,
To sing no more until the green come back,
Unless it be to give a cry of pain.
And all those creatures which cannot refrain
From joy in summer, now from love are free,
Because the icy cold their heart has chilled. —
But mine with love is filled;
For tender thoughts are not inspired in me,
Nor taken from me, by the turn of years,
But by a queen who knows not many years.

IV

The leaves have past their time and had their day,
Which first to life the breath of spring did stir,
To deck the world; no living grass is seen,
And every verdant twig is hid away,
Except on pine, on bay, or else on fir,
Or on some other tree that keeps its green.
The season is so savage and so keen,
The little flowers on the bank it dulls,
Which frost will not endure the earth above. —
And yet unfeeling Love
His thorn from out my bosom never pulls:
Wherefore am I condemned to wear it ever
While I shall live, tho' I should live forever.

V

The springs pour out their waters mistily,
 Pusht forth by vapors hidden down below,
 Which mother earth's abysses upward thrust.
The path, on pleasant days so sweet to me,
 Is now a running stream, and long shall flow;
 For while the winter warreth, flow it must.
 Enamel-like the ground puts on a crust;
And stagnant water quickly turns to glass,
 Lockt out of doors by petrifying frost. —
 Yet I, so battle-tost,
Have not gone back a single step, alas!
 Nor will I go! If martyrdom is joy,
 Then death must be the best that men enjoy.

Envoy

O Song, what shall become of me when spring
 Shall come renewed and sweet, when Love shall fall
 Like rain from all the skies to hearts untold,
 If now, despite the cold,
Love dwells in me, and nowhere else at all?
 I know my fate: to be a man of rock,
 If Little Maid shall have for heart a rock.

Here, then, we have a group of three poems, all playing on the word *pietra*, all displaying the most extraordinary artistic invention and mastery of technique, one of them ingenious rather than lovely, the other two strangely and hauntingly beautiful. What would we

not give to penetrate the mystery of these verses, so passionate and yet so discreet! Like Violet and Matilda, this Little Maid is a figure so elusive that at times we wonder whether she ever was real. Who she was, and what she was to Dante, no one, perhaps, save the poet himself, has ever known. And yet her charm is such that we perpetually and gladly allow ourselves to be lured by hopes manifestly foredoomed.

Ere we go further in pursuit of this Will o' the Wisp, let us see whether other poems can be added to the series, and whether any of these — if such be found — can afford us an additional clue. Among Dante's sonnets there is one, *E' non è legno di sì forti nocchi*, which once has in the rime the word *pietra*, used not as an epithet to designate the heartless lady, but as a means of describing her power. Its tone is bitter; the person wooed is very young: shall we include it in the group?

The knottiest wood that hath existed yet,
The hardest, most impenetrable stone,
This cruel maid, who seeks to lay me prone,
With one sweet look, aflame with love would set.
When turns to gaze a man that she hath met,
Unless he flee, she maketh him atone
And die of broken heart; no grace is shown,
No earnest ever rendered of her debt.
Why is it, God such sovereignty grants
To such a young, unfeeling lady's eyes,
Who life to every faithful swain denies?

So deaf to pity, when a lover dies,
She turns away and looks at him askance,
And even hides her beauties from his glance.

This is of much the same tenor as the two *sestine* — passion on the one side, youthful hardness on the other. It is not in the least like the poems to Beatrice or those to the persons I have called Matilda and Violet. One might readily enough decide to assign it to the Pietra series, were it not still more akin to another set, which we have not yet considered, a group of lyrics devoted to Lady Philosophy. When we come to examine these, we shall find in them, as in the sonnet, the idea that the lady's power comes from on high, the extension of her cruelty to mankind in general, and her desire to hide her beauty from view. The extreme youth of the lady is found in them also. I am therefore inclined, despite the word "stone," to put this sonnet into the class of the philosophical poems, rather than into the Pietra category.

One might properly, it seems to me, make the same disposal of another sonnet, probably by Dante, which shows likeness both to the Pietra and to the Philosophy type, but somewhat more to the latter.

I curse the day when first I saw a while
The light which in your treacherous eyes you bore;
The hour when you descended, full of guile,
To draw my soul from out my bosom's core.
Also I curse the loved and loving file,

The polisher of word and metaphor,
Which I have wrought for you in riming style,
That you may honored be forevermore.
Also I curse my memory obstinate,
Which firmly holds whate'er shall fatal be —
Namely, your figure fair and obdurate,
Because of which is Love exposed to hate,
And everybody laughs at him and me,
Who think Fortuna's wheel to confiscate.

While the "polishing of word and metaphor" would appear especially to befit the Pietra songs, which are the most elaborate of Dante's lyrics, the phrase suits well enough the poems dealing with Lady Philosophy; for these, too, are full of conscious artistry. To Lady Philosophy, rather than to Pietra, belongs the imputation of deceitful intention, as well as the vague indication of universal cruelty. The last two lines, also,

And everybody laughs at him and me,
Who think Fortuna's wheel to confiscate,

with their suggestion of mad aspiration and public discomfiture, point to the philosophical series. The sonnet *Deh! piangi meco, tu dogliosa pietra*, with its apparent political allegory, would merit a conspicuous place, were it really Dante's; but there seems to be no sufficient reason for accepting it.

We come now to an ode, the most passionate and the most extravagant of all Dante's poems, *Così nel mio*

parlar voglio esser aspro, which, containing as it does the epithet *pietra* applied to the lady, must in all probability be considered as a member of our group. If so, it would seem to mark the frenzied climax of the lover's infatuation. The poem begins with an avowal of the author's purpose to discard the "sweet style" which becomes amatory verse, and to adopt a language as harsh as the conduct of *Pietra*. Such a change of vocabulary, contrary to his principles, was surely not made without cause. In his treatise on writing in the vulgar tongue, *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, Dante gives careful rules with regard to the choice of words; "for," says he, "if you study the elegant mother speech, which, as I have said before, should be used in tragic composition by vernacular poets, whom it is our purpose to instruct, you will be careful to keep in your sieve only the most dignified terms." Now, in this furious ode, the poet is about to throw dignity and sweetness to the winds, and warns his readers accordingly. And this is not the only time. At the outset of one other poem he gives a similar warning. The third ode of the *Banquet*, a versified disquisition on the true nature of nobility, begins thus:

The dulcet words of love, which I of old

In meditation sought,

I now must leave, tho' not without a thought

Of going back sometime.

Such dire, disdainful deeds have just been wrought

By this, my Lady bold

That fear of them the thoroughfare doth hold
 Of mine accustomed rime.
 Since I must bide a more propitious clime,
 The honeyed style in which I did rehearse
 The charms of love, away from me I fling:
 Of goodness I will sing,
 Of genuine nobility's true nurse;
 With harsh and cunning verse
 Showing how false the judgment is, and worse,
 Of those who would assert that gentle worth
 In riches hath its birth.
 First I invoke that Lord of everything
 Who dwells so patent in my Lady's eyes
 That she her own sweet self doth idolize.

The Lady of this strophe is without question Lady Philosophy, who is shown, in one of Dante's ballads, enraptured with the image of Love in her own eyes.

Returning to our "harsh" Pietra poem, we shall note that, although the figures rather suggest out-of-doors, there is no plain indication of locality, as there was in the hilly first *sestina*, nor of season, such as we found in the two *sestine* and in the wintry ode.

I

So harsh shall be my speech, so harsh and rough,
 As is the conduct of a pretty Stone
 Who daily makes her own
 Increasing cruelty and insolence.
 She clothes herself in jasper plate so tough

That, thanks to it, or thanks to flight alone,
No shaft from sheaf hath flown
That e'er hath caught her heart without defence.
She kills her foe, for all he hie him thence,
Or hide, or flee the deadly darts she flings,
Which, borne by unseen wings,
Descend on him and shatter every mail.
Against her might, my strength and reason fail.

II

No shield can screen me from her shattering blow,
From her pursuing gaze I vainly flee.
As flower on stem, so she
Perches upon my mind with conquering smile.
She seems as heedful of my bitter woe
As ship seems heedful of a waveless sea.
The weight that crushes me
Is far beyond the scope of any style.
O pitiless and agonizing file,
Which silently dost wear my life away,
Art not ashamed to stay
And gnaw my heart to dust from peel to peel,
As I'm ashamed to tell whence comes thy zeal ?

III

Whene'er I find myself in others' view
Thinking of her, lest men my thought may see
Transpiring outwardly,
My heart is more afraid and trembles more
Than I'm afraid of Death, which now doth chew

With Love's own teeth my every faculty;
Which so consumeth me
That intellect stands still, enfeebled sore.
Love striketh me to earth, and standeth o'er
My prostrate form, with Dido's deadly steel;
Then I to him appeal,
Pleading for grace, and piteously I cry,
But mercy Love doth stubbornly deny.

IV

He, lifting now and then his hand, defies
My sickly life — this tyrant overbold,
Who close to earth doth hold
My body flat outstretcht, too tired to fight.
Then surge into my brain despairing cries.
The blood which all the scattered veins enfold,
Knowing the heart is cold,
Comes rushing to its call, and leaves me white.
My left arm raising, he my side doth smite
So hard, the pain comes throbbing to my heart.
Then I: "If he should start
To strike again, Death will have taken me
Or e'er the murderous blow completed be."

V

Would I could see him split the cruel jade
Right through her icy heart, who mine doth crack!
Then Death would not be black,
Which, chasing after beauty, I pursue.
She gives no more in sunshine than in shade,

This outlaw thievish, deadlly in attack.
Why barketh she not back
For me, as I for her, in boiling brew ?
“ Quickly,” I’d cry, “ I come to succor you ! ”
That would I gladly do, and laying hold
Of ringlets blond as gold,
Which Love, to torture me, hath curled and dyed,
My hands would clutch till I was satisfied.

VI

If I could seize those golden locks and pull
(Those curls, for me a scourge, my heart to flay!),
From early in the day
I’d hold them tight till vespers and the dark;
And I should not be kind or pitiful,
But rather like a bear, when he’s at play.
A thousand should repay
Love’s lashings, which on me have left their mark.
Into those handsome eyes, — whence flies the spark
To fire my heart, now dead within, — I’d stare
With close, unchanging glare,
In retribution for her flight from me,
And then in peace and love I’d set her free.

Envoy

Now, Song, go straight unto that lawless one
Who robbed and murdered me, and never gave
The thing that most I crave,
And shoot an arrow thro’ her cruel breast;
For fair renown is won by wrong redrest.

A weird, uncomfortable poem, with a note of desperate wickedness, such as one might expect from a middle-aged man violently in love with a very young girl!

One more ode claims our attention, a beautiful and passionate one, less vehement than the "harsh" poem just quoted. Whether or not it belongs to our series, is a vexed and doubtless insoluble problem; for while its general tone suggests *pietra*, it does not contain that word. Probably connected with this composition, and intended to introduce it, is a short Latin letter, addressed to Marquis Moroello Malaspina, of the Lunigiana in northwestern Italy, who was Dante's host in 1306. After a brief introductory declaration of devotion and gratitude, the author, who has just left with regret the free, friendly court of the Malaspina family, goes on to relate: "No sooner had I set foot, heedless and unafraid, upon the Arno's bank, than lo! a woman, falling like a thunderbolt, suddenly appeared, I know not how, in character and person quite in keeping with my lot. Oh! how bewildered I was at her appearance! But my bewilderment came to an end in the terror of the following thunder-clap. For as thunders immediately follow lightnings by day, so, when I had beheld the flash of her beauty, love took possession of me, fearful and masterful. And, fierce as an exiled lord returning after long banishment to his very own, he either slew or expelled or bound whatever in me had been opposed to him. He killed, therefore, that praiseworthy resolution

of mine, to beware of women and their songs; he impiously cast out, as objects of suspicion, the constant meditations in which I was contemplating both heavenly and earthly things; and finally, lest my soul should rebel further against him, he so bound my free will that I am constrained to turn, not whither I wish, but whither he directs. Love, then, rules within me, with no strength to resist him; and how he rules me, you must learn outside the contents of this document."

Although the authenticity of this odd epistle has been contested, it is regarded by most scholars as probably genuine; if not authentic, it is of course a deliberate forgery. Accepting it provisionally, we must infer that the ode in question was written about 1307, beside the Arno; and, further, that, if the poem really is connected with Pietra, it is the first of the series, since it has to do with the first appearance of the woman in question. From the verses themselves we learn that the scene is on the Arno, among mountains, therefore in the Casentino, the wild and Alpine upper Arno valley; from the same source we learn also that the poem was written during Dante's exile.

The fantastic style of the letter constitutes a real stumbling-block. Several suppositions are possible: (1) that the work is a stupid fabrication, patched together from the poem; (2) that it was intended by Dante to suggest an allegorical interpretation of the lady and the verse; (3) that Dante purposely couched it in a mock-

heroic vein; (4) that he wrote it solemnly, describing a genuine passion. I am inclined to believe either that the epistle is forged (in which case it naturally would have no importance) or that it was intended to be mock-heroic, slightly deprecating an infatuation of which the author was ashamed. And well he might be, if it was the infatuation of a married man of forty-two or so for a young country girl. Still another hypothesis, recently put forward, would explain letter and poem as an extravagant compliment to a hostess. To the question of allegory I shall be obliged presently to return. First let us consider the poem.

I

O Love, since I must sing a sad appeal
 To make the people hear
And me bereft of all my strength to show,
Now give me skill to tell the grief I feel,
 That words may let appear
The pangs that pricking from my bosom go.
Thou 'dst have me die, and I would have it so.
But who will sorrow, if I cannot say
What thou dost make me pay ?
 Who will believe that such a load I bear ?
But if thou grantest speech to match my woe,
Let not the culprit, ere I pass away,
Hear aught from me! For this, my Lord, I pray!
 For should she catch my inner voice of care,
Pity would make her fairest face less fair.

II

I cannot flec from her, nor yet prevent
Her coming to my mind;
Nor yet from thought, which brings her there, refrain.
My crazy soul, on self-destruction bent,
Still pictures her, unkind
And beautcous as she is, and thus repeats its pain;
Then looks on her once more, and full again
Of boundless longing, drawn from witching eyes,
Against itself it cries,
Which lit the fire that burneth it to death.
All reason's checks and arguments are vain
When raging whirlwinds in my bosom rise!
My anguish, loath to bide within me, flies
Forth from my lips so plain, men hear its breath,
And eyes to pay their tribute summoneth.

III

The hostile image, which remaineth so
Victorious and fell
Within my mind, and chains my will with fear,
Enamored of itself, doth make me go
Where it in flesh doth dwell,
As like to like its course will ever steer.
Sunshine, I know, makes snow to disappear;
But what of that ? a prisoner am I,
Whom, howsoc'er I try,
My own unwilling feet to scaffold bear.
When I have come anigh, I seem to hear

A voice: "Come, come, wilt see this fellow die?"
Seeking to whom I pleading may reply,
 I turn about! so maddened by the stare
 Of eyes unwilling guiltless life to spare.

IV

What I shall do, thus wounded by thy dart,
 Thou knowest, Love, not I,
 Who stay'st to gaze my lifeless form upon.
And if my soul returneth to the heart,
 Forgetfulness was nigh
 And ignorance was there while it was gone.
 When I arise again, my wound to con,
Which so undid me when I felt the blow,
I cannot rally so
 As not to quake in all my limbs for fright.
 Reveals full clear enough my visage wan
What was the thunderbolt that laid me low.
Tho' pretty smiles those lightning-strokes bestow,
 My face must long remain devoid of light,
 Because my timid spirit fears to fight.

V

'Mid mountains, thus, O Love, hast wrought me ill,
 Far up along the stream
 Beside whose bank thou always rulest me.
Here, quick or dead, thou handlest me at will,
 Thanks to a cruel gleam
 Which lights the way to death, flashing for thee.
No ladies here, no gentle folk I see,

To mourn, alas! for my distressful lot;
If she still heeds me not,
 None else to guess my sorrow hath the wit;
And she, from thy domain compelled to flee,
Defies, O Lord, thy sharpest arrow's shot.
Of hardened pride, before her heart, a clot
 Turns back the point of all the shafts that hit,
And thus her armored breast by none is bit.

Envoy

Now go, my little mountain Song, thy way!
Florence, my city, haply shalt thou see,
Who locks her gates to me,
 Empty of pity, seeming love to spurn.
To her, if thou shouldst be admitted, say:
 " My maker nevermore can war with thee!
Up yonder, he is chained so mightily
 That, even were thy cruelty less stern,
No longer hath he freedom to return."

The question whether this poem belongs to our group is of the utmost importance: for, if it does, the date of the Pietra episode is determined beyond doubt (whatever we may think of the Latin letter) as belonging to the period of Dante's exile, and the place is fixed somewhere in the Casentino, a locality dimly indicated by the "hills" of the first *sestina*; furthermore, inasmuch as the cruel lady and Florence appear as opposing powers, this lady cannot, as some have suggested, symbolize the city. The word *pietra* being absent, we have no definite

evidence; but the Pietra-like temper of the poem, combined with the lack of resemblance to any other group, inclines me to the belief that we have in this ode a member of our set, which would then comprise five pieces — two *sestine* and three *canzoni*. It may be that the use of the symbol of stone did not occur to Dante until he came to write the second of the series.

In all these poems Love is personified, appearing as an irresistible god; and in four of them we have the additional image of the stone, to represent the insensible young beloved. To this limited extent, the verses are symbolistic. Now we must ask ourselves: are they also allegorical? In other words, have we to do here with a real person or with a feminine form standing for something else, as, in the *Divine Comedy*, Matilda stands for innocence and Beatrice for revelation? Allegory, in Dante's writings, is not confined to the great *Comedy*: we find it also, as I have said before, in a number of lyrics devoted to Lady Philosophy and expounded in part by the author himself in his *Banquet*. In stating his reasons for publishing this book, Dante declares, among other things, that he was moved by the fear of infamy. "I fear," he says, "the infamy of having followed such a passion as the reader of the aforesaid odes conceives to have dominated me; which infamy is removed by my present full account of myself, which shows that not passion but virtue was the moving cause. I intend also to reveal the real meaning of those poems, which by

some cannot be seen unless I tell it, being hidden under the figure of allegory."

We know from himself that he purposed thus to explain certain poems whose first inspiration came from a compassionate young lady figuring in the latter part of the *New Life*. This comforter, he tells us, was made by him a symbol of philosophy; and he apparently would have us believe that all the amatory verse seemingly addressed to this lady was made with an allegorical intention — as some of it certainly was. Now, we should like to know whether this group of poems is the only one that he meant to interpret allegorically. The *Banquet*, far from completed, contains only three of the fourteen odes it was planned to elucidate. What we are especially curious to learn is whether Dante had it in mind to subject the *Pietra* lyrics to the same process. We can only guess; and we have no particular facilities even for guessing.

At this point we must decide whether the *Pietra* poems and the philosophical poems really do form two separate groups; for it has been assumed by some scholars that *Pietra* and the personifier of philosophy are one. In favor of this hypothesis is the use of the word *Pargoletta*, or "Little Maid," in one undoubted *Pietra* poem and in two that almost surely belong to Lady Philosophy. In both series the loved object is very youthful. Moreover, there are a few pieces of verse that seem to fit almost equally well into both

categories. But if we take each set as a whole, we shall find that it is tolerably distinct from the other. The poems to Pietra, intensely passionate and always hopeless, are associated with mountains and winter; those presumably dedicated to Lady Philosophy are characterized by a suggestion of the supernatural, by a conflict between an old love and a new, and by variations in the attitude of the lady. Not every member of either class contains all the features of its own category; but none, as I have divided them, contains features of the other. There seems, then, to be a sufficient principle of differentiation.

This differentiation, however, does not dispose of the question whether the lyrics dealing with Pietra have an allegorical intent. For even though their lady do not represent philosophy, she may symbolize something else — for instance, poetic art, a suitable object, if we consider their workmanship. Florence, too, would be appropriate as the hard-hearted mistress, if we excluded one of the five pieces; otherwise, as I have shown, it would be impossible. But really, aside from Dante's statement in the *Banquet*, which may not have to do with these poems at all, we have no cause to regard them as allegorical. There is no hint of mystic significance in the verses themselves; in fact, their tenor makes a symbolic purpose seem almost incongruous.

If, our Pietra being reduced to a creature of flesh and blood, the object (supposedly) of a transient and be-

lated infatuation, we inquire who she was, we receive no answer. Tempting as it is, we must reject as unproven the hypothesis of a modern critic (V. Imbriani, *Sulle canzoni pietrose di Dante*, in *Studi danteschi*, 1891), that she was Pietra di Donato di Brunaccio, wife of the poet's brother Francesco, a theory which, if we could accept it, would account for the note of wickedness previously observed. Quite unsupported is the identification, by a Renaissance writer (A. M. Amadi, *Annotationi sopra una canzone morale*, 1565), of our Pietra with Pietra degli Scrovegni, an aristocratic and cultivated lady of Padua. Equally unlikely — going back to Dante's own century — is the hearsay affirmation by Boccaccio (*Compendio*, xvii) that Dante fell in love, while visiting the Casentino, with a certain woman attractive in face but afflicted with a goitre. Summing up the little we know and all we can lawfully infer, the most explicit statement we can make, even tentatively, is that the poems we have examined express a bitter and unrequited passion of the poet for a young mountain girl.

IV. BEATRICE

DANTE'S *New Life* opens in this wise: "In that part of the book of my memory before which little is legible, is found a rubric, *Incipit Vita Nova* ['Beginning of the New Life']; under which rubric I find the words which it is my purpose to copy down in this little book, and, if not all of them, at least their substance." The author's plan, therefore, is to record the psychic experiences of his "new life," the life which begins with his rebirth under the influence of "the most gentle Beatrice." And these experiences extend almost as far back into his childhood as distinct memory can go. The first of them, which occurs in his ninth year, is narrated as follows: "Nine times already, after my birth, the heaven of light [the sphere of the sun] had returned almost to the same point, in its own [annual] revolution, when first appeared to my eyes the glorious queen of my mind, who was called Beatrice by many who knew not what they were calling." The last clause may mean also, "who knew not what to call": in the one case the significance would be that her acquaintances, who used her real name, Beatrice, were unaware of the mystic appropriateness of that appellation, which means Bestower of Blessings; in the other case we should understand that strangers, not knowing her name, instinctively called her Beatrice because of her benign

influence. I believe Dante intentionally made the phrase mysteriously ambiguous, in order, at least ostensibly, to leave his readers in doubt whether Beatrice was his lady's actual name or a poetic epithet, like Primavera or Pietra.

The episode continues thus: "She had already been so long in this life that in her time the starry heaven [the sphere of the fixed stars, which revolves one degree in a hundred years] had moved toward the eastern quarter one of the twelve parts of a degree." She had, therefore, lived one-twelfth of one hundred years, or eight and one-third years. "It was, then, almost at the beginning of her ninth year that she appeared to me, and I saw her almost at the end of my ninth. She appeared to me clad in a very noble color, modest and dignified, a color blood-red [the symbol of love], girdled and adorned after the fashion that befitted her very youthful age." Now we come to the description of his transformation, couched in the psychological terminology of the day. "At that moment I declare verily that the spirit of life, which dwells in the most secret chamber of the heart, began to tremble so hard that it was horribly evident in the smallest pulses; and, trembling, it spake these words: 'Lo! a God stronger than I, who shall come and rule over me.'" The spirit of life, in Dante, is in the future to be governed by the God of Love. "At that moment the animal spirit, which dwells in the high chamber [the brain] to which all the spirits

of sense [which we call *nerves*] carry their perceptions, began to wonder greatly, and, addressing in particular the spirits of sight, it spake these words: ‘Your happiness hath now appeared.’ ” From now on, Dante’s senses, and especially the sense of sight, shall have their joy in Beatrice alone. “At that point the natural spirit, which dwells in that place where our nourishment is administered [the liver], began to weep, and, weeping, spake these words: ‘Woe is me! for often I shall be obstructed henceforth!’ ” Under the influence of Love, the natural operations of the body are liable to interruption by palpitations and swoons.

The strange, overmastering effect of love on the physical and mental faculties is described by the poet in an ode, not included in the *New Life*, called *E’ m’ incresce di me sì malamente*, which begins:

I feel such cruel pity for myself
That sympathy awakes
A pain as keen as that of my distress.

After a vivid portrayal of the agonies of love, the poem goes on to tell how they began, carrying their origin considerably further back than it is carried in the more rational account given by the *New Life*.

V

The day this lady came into the world, —
As still is clearly shown
In memory’s book, which fadeth fast away, —

Into my tiny, helpless form was hurled
A passion all unknown,
Which kept me filled with quivering dismay.
A check was put on all my powers that day
So suddenly that straight to earth I fell,
Hearing a voice, which fearful smote my breast.
If truth the book do tell,
My greatest spirit quaked, with shortened breath,
So hard, 't was plain that death
Had come to earth to be that spirit's guest.
Now Love, who did it all, is sore distress.

VI

Then, later, when I saw her beauteous face,
The source of all my harm,
(Fair listening ladies, who avoid me not!)
That faculty which hath the highest place,
Considering her charm,
Clearly perceived its miserable lot
And recognized the longing that was got
By one sweet lingering look her eyes did cast;
And thus address the other faculties:
"Who once was here, is past!
Henceforth that lovely figure shall I see
Which now doth frighten me;
And over all of us, when it shall please
Her queenly eyes, the sceptre she shall seize."

"From that time forth," the *New Life* goes on, "I
declare that Love ruled my soul, which was so quickly

wedded to him, and began to assume over me such assurance and such mastery, thanks to the power given him by my imagination, that I was constrained to do all his pleasures completely. Many times did he command me to go in search of this very youthful angel; wherefore did I often in my boyhood set forth to seek her, and I would see her of such noble and praiseworthy bearing that surely one might say of her that phrase of the poet Homer, ‘She seemed not the child of mortal man, but of God.’” If, as Boccaccio tells us, this maiden was Beatrice Portinari, the daughter of a neighbor, it is likely that Dante saw her frequently. Not until nine years after the first meeting, however, when the young people were seventeen, did Beatrice speak to her admirer — if we are to believe the account in the *Vita Nuova*. This first greeting was the occasion of the first poem included in the “little book,” the dream-sonnet, which he sent to various literary men of his day, several of whom replied in verse to the new poet. To this sonnet we shall presently return.

In the stanzas above quoted, one is particularly struck by these lines:

“Who once was here, is past!
Henceforth that lovely figure shall I see
Which now doth frighten me,”

which would seem to point to a previous interest, before the coming of Beatrice. One calls to mind the screen ladies, whom I mentioned in the discussion of Violet —

those young persons for whom, according to the *New Life*, the poet professed an admiration, in order to conceal his love for Beatrice. They appear at this stage of the story; and we may, without undue skepticism, suspect that, in the budding emotions of a lad of seventeen to twenty, no sharp distinction was made between "the most gentle" and sundry other gentle lasses. It may be that we have a glimpse of that fluctuating period in an unattached sonnet, probably Dante's, *Due donne in cima della mente mia*:

Upon the summit of my mind I see
Two ladies, who of love are come to speak.
The one possesseth grace and merit meek,
Mated with prudence and with modesty.
Beauty the other hath, and charm, in fee;
Sweet gentleness her company doth seek.
Thanks to my kindly master, I, all weak,
Stand here, obedient to their sovereignty.
Beauty and worth their case to judgment state:
"How can a heart divided stand," they plead,
"Between two maids, with love immaculate?"
The Font of gentle speech declares his creed:
"One may love beauty, which doth captivate,
And virtue may be loved for noble deed."

In consequence of some real or pretended captivation, Beatrice denies Dante her greeting. Then comes the episode of her mockery, at the wedding banquet; and that is followed by the criticism of Dante's verses by a

group of lady friends, and the poet's conversion to the "*dolce stil nuovo*." The immediate fruit of this change of manner is the first *canzone*, *Donne ch' avete intelletto d'amore*. Of these things I have already spoken in detail, and I have cited (p. 21) a stanza of the ode, which discourses of the angelic character of Beatrice, her fitness for Heaven, and her miraculous influence on earth.

After a couple of little poems in the "new style" comes the death of the "most noble" lady's father, who, if he really was Folco, of the distinguished old Ghibelline family of the Portinari, passed away on December 31, 1289, having been four times Prior of Florence, and having founded the hospital of Santa Maria Novella. We still have his will, dated January 15, 1288, bequeathing his property to five sons and six daughters, among them "Bice, wife of Master Simone dei Bardi." If, then, Boccaccio's identification is correct, Bice, or Beatrice, was by 1288 wedded to this Simone, a banker and philanthropist well known in Florence. Dante nowhere speaks of a marriage of Beatrice; but possibly his change of style was not unconnected with such an event.

"Not many days later, as it pleased the glorious Lord (who did not deny death unto himself), he who had been the father of that great miracle which the most noble Beatrice was seen to be, issuing from this life, went forth verily to eternal glory. Wherefore, inasmuch as

such a departure is painful to those who are left and have been friends of him who parteth, and inasmuch as there is no such close friendship as that from a good father to a good child and from a good child to a good father, and inasmuch as the goodness of this lady was of very high degree, and her father (as many believe, and rightly) was good to a high degree, it is clear that this lady was most bitterly filled with pain. And inasmuch as, according to the custom of the aforesaid city, ladies gather together with ladies, and men with men, for such mourning, many ladies gathered there where this Beatrice was weeping piteously; wherefore I, as I watched some ladies returning from her, heard them speak words of this most gentle one, how she was grieving. Among which words I heard some that said: 'Surely she weepeth so that whosoever should see her would have to die of pity.' Then these ladies passed on; and I was left in such sadness that from time to time a tear wet my face, wherefore I concealed myself by often putting my hands to my eyes. And if it were not that I expected to hear more of her, being in a place where passed the greater part of those ladies who went forth from her, I should have hidden myself the moment the tears had beset me. Therefore, as I was still remaining in the same place, more ladies passed near me, who went speaking among them these words: 'Which of us shall ever be happy, since we have heard this lady speak so piteously?' After these, others went by, who came

saying: 'This man, who is here, weepeth neither more nor less than if he had seen her, as we have.' Wherefore I, reflecting, determined to write words, since I had fit cause to write, in which words I should include all that I had heard from these ladies. And inasmuch as I gladly would have questioned them, had it not been reprehensible, I set about composing as if I had questioned them and they had answered me. And I made two sonnets, in the first of which I question after the fashion that I felt a desire to ask, and in the other I tell their reply, taking what I heard from them as if they had said it to me by way of answer."

The two sonnets, then, together form a dialogue, the first being spoken by the author, the second by the ladies. The same subject recurs in two other poems by Dante, *Onde venite voi così pensose* and *Voi donne che pietoso atto mostrate*, not included in the *New Life*; but in the first of these we have only the poet's speech, without the ladies' reply, while in the second the question and the answer are included in a single poem. Here are the two sonnets from the *Vita Nuova*, whose origin the writer has just narrated:

Dante to Ladies

O ye who walk with self-forgetful mien,
With lowered eyes betraying hidden rue,
Whence come ye, wearing pity's very hue
And very look? Ah! tell, where have ye been?
Have ye perchance our gentle Lady seen,

With Love upon her face all bathed in dew ?
Ladies, reply! My heart declares 't is true,
Because ye walk majestic, like a queen.
And if ye come from such a piteousness,
I pray you here a bit with me to bide
And how it fares with her, to me confess.
Your eyes cannot conceal that they have cried.
I see you come, such pictures of distress,
I dare not think of what is prophesied.

Ladies to Dante

Art thou the man who oft hath been inclined
To sing of Her, addressing us alone ?
His voice and thine, indeed, are like in tone,
And yet thy visage seems of different kind.
Alas! why weepest thou, so unresigned
That thou wouldst kindle pity in a stone ?
Oh! hast thou listened to her piteous moan,
Who canst not now conceal thy sorrowing mind ?
Leave tears to us, and sad funereal pace!
'T is sin to wish that we be comforted,
Since we have heard her speak with mournful grace.
Such sadness hovers plainly o'er her head
That who should try to look upon her face,
Weeping would sink to earth before her, dead.

We have now reached the central incident of the *Vita Nuova*: an illness of the author, during which he has a feverish dream, foreboding the death of his beloved. This delirious vision forms the theme of the second

canzone. Here is Dante's prose paraphrase of it: "Some days after this, it came to pass that in a certain part of my person there fell upon me a painful illness, wherefrom I continually suffered for nine days very bitter pain, which brought me to such weakness that I had to stay as those who cannot move. I declare that on the ninth day, feeling almost unbearable pain, I had a thought, which was of my lady. And when I had thought of her a little, I returned in meditation to my enfeebled life; and, seeing how slight was its duration, even had it been sound, I began to weep to myself at such misery. Wherefore, sighing heavily, I said to myself: 'It must needs be that the most gentle Beatrice at some time die.' And at that such violent distraction came upon me that I closed my eyes and began to change like a frantic person, and to imagine in this wise. At the outset of my fancy's wandering, certain faces of disheveled women appeared to me, saying: 'Thou, too, shalt die!' And after these women, there appeared to me certain faces strange and horrible to see, which said unto me: 'Thou art dead!' My fancy thus beginning to stray, I came to such a pass that I knew not where I was; and I seemed to see women walking disheveled on the street, weeping, marvelously sad; and I seemed to see the sun darkened so that the stars showed themselves, of such a color as to lead me to think that they were weeping; and it seemed to me that the birds flying through the air dropped dead, and that there were very

great earthquakes. And, as I marveled in this fancy, sore afraid, I imagined a certain friend coming and saying: 'Now knowest thou not? Thy wondrous lady hath parted from this world!' Then began I to weep right piteously; and not only did I weep in imagination, but I wept with my eyes, wetting them with real tears. I thought I looked toward heaven, and I seemed to see a host of angels returning upward with a very white little cloud before them; and these angels seemed to be singing gloriously, and it seemed to me their song was 'Hosanna in excelsis,' and I seemed to hear naught else. Then it seemed to me that my heart, where was so much love, said to me: 'True it is that our lady lieth dead.' And therefore I seemed to go to see the body in which had been that most noble and blessed soul. And so strong was my errant fancy that it showed me this lady dead; and I thought ladies were covering her head with a white veil; and I thought her face had such a look of meekness that it seemed to say: 'I am beholding the source of peace.' " After the funeral rites, Dante seems to return to his chamber, and there to call on Beatrice and death; then, waking with the name of Beatrice on his lips, he finds that his sobs have aroused consternation in a very young and sympathetic relative (probably a sister) who was watching over him, and that her weeping has startled other ladies in the sick room. Let me cite one stanza from the middle of the poem, which is called *Donna pietosa e di novella etate*:

IV

Then I beheld full many a fearful thing

In that delirium which encompass me.

I seemed to be in some unheard-of spot

Where women all unkempt were wandering,

Some shedding tears, some wailing piteously,

Whose cries a pelting fire of sadness shot.

Then slowly darkness seems the sun to blot

Till finally the smallest star appears —

Both stars and sun in tears.

The soaring birdlets seem to drop in flocks;

The earth (I see it!) rocks;

And, weak and pale, a man: “ Knowest thou not ?

Hast thou not heard the story ? Dost not care ?

Dead is thy lady, she that was so fair ! ”

Next in order is the incident of Monna Vanna and Monna Bice, the former, who is surnamed “ Primavera,” walking ahead of Dante’s lady (see p. 58). Then, after a discourse on personification, come two “ new style ” sonnets of peculiar serenity and sweetness, placed here, no doubt, to furnish a contrast to the impending catastrophe. Here is the first, *Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare*:

So dignified my lady looks always,

And dear, when she a greeting doth bestow,

That every trembling tongue doth speechless grow,

And eyes are all afraid on her to gaze.

In meekness clad, tho’ hearing naught but praise,

Her modest, kindly way she still doth go.

A thing she seems from Heaven sent below,
A miracle, our spirits to amaze.
Her countenance so charms the seeing eye
That sweetness swells the heart, from up above,
Which he who sees not, cannot comprehend;
Forth from her face there seems its way to wend
A sprite replete with gentleness and love,
Which beareth to the soul this message: "Sigh!"

The second is called *Vede perfettamente ogni salute*:

All happiness he fully doth behold
With other ladies who my lady sees;
And those who walk with her should not withhold
Their gratitude to God for his decrees.
Her beauty hath such majesty untold,
No jealousy its sight accompanies;
But her companions it doth all enfold
In faith and love and gentle qualities.
Her presence turns to meekness every thing,
And gives such dignity to womankind
That men not her alone, but others, bless.
And all her doings are so comforting
That not a man can bring her back to mind
Who shall not sigh with loving tenderness.

While the poet is in this mood, and just in the act of composing an ode expressive of calm and almost super-human contentment, the blow suddenly falls. No poem marks the arrival of the news of the most gentle lady's death. An abrupt pause, a quotation from the Lamen-

tations of Jeremiah, a terse statement of the event and of the reasons which prevent the afflicted lover from singing his grief: that is all — save a disquisition on the meaning of the number nine. Only after this discourse, and after mention of a mourning composition (unknown to us) that the author has excluded from the *New Life* because it was written in Latin, do we come upon the poem of bereavement which we have been expecting, *Gli occhi dolenti per pietà del core*. Let us be satisfied with one stanza of this third long *canzone*, the strophe which tells how Beatrice died neither of fever heat nor of mortal chill, as is the normal death of mankind, but of her celestial goodness and fitness for Heaven. Here we find the earliest occurrence, in Dante's poetry, of the full name, Beatrice; in the verses written before her death she was either unnamed or, in one merely complimentary sonnet, called by the common, abbreviated form of the name, Bice.

II

Gone forth is Beatrice to deepest Heaven,
Where angels ever dwell in peace on high;
To live with them, you, ladies, hath she left.
No quality of cold this grief hath given,
Nor yet of heat, as other women die:
Her goodness only hath the world bereft;
The light of her humility hath cleft
The circling skies with all the power of love,
And wakened wonder in th' eternal Sire,

And then a sweet desire
To call that queen of blessedness above
And bid her heavenward from the earth retire;
Because he saw our sad existence here
Was far from worthy of a thing so dear.

Thereupon ensues a curious episode, which we had better hear in Dante's words: "After this ode was written, there came unto me one who, in the degrees of friendship, is my friend immediately after the first [Guido Cavalcanti]; and he was so close in kinship to this glorious lady that no one was more so." He must have been one of her brothers, possibly — always assuming that she was really a Portinari — the one called Manetto. "And when he had entered into speech with me, he besought me to write something for a lady who had died; and he covered over his words, that it might seem he spake of another woman, who in fact had passed away. Wherefore I, understanding that he spake only in behalf of the blessed one, promised to do what his prayer requested. Then, pondering over it, I determined to write a sonnet, in which I should express some grief, and give it to this friend of mine, in order that I might appear to have made it for him." Not only a sonnet, but also a short *canzone* was composed, it would seem, in this strange fashion, ostensibly in mourning for the lady chosen by Beatrice's brother, but really inspired by the death of Beatrice herself. The poems, which must have circulated as

elegies for the other lady, and perhaps under the name of the friend, are apparently inserted and explained in the *New Life* for the double purpose of attaching them to Beatrice and of dispelling any possible mistake concerning their authorship.

Familiar to all is the picture of the poet, on the anniversary of his lady's death, drawing figures of angels on tablets, unaware of the presence of visitors who have entered while he was absorbed in his work and his memories. "They," he relates, "were looking at that which I did; and, as I was told afterwards, they had been there some time before I perceived them. When I saw them, I arose and, greeting them, said: 'Another was with me just now, and therefore was I thoughtful.' " On this theme he wrote a sonnet, with two beginnings, *Era venuta nella mente mia*, to which I shall presently revert.

At a later time, seeing a band of pilgrims traverse Florence on their way to Rome, he was moved to this reflection: "These pilgrims seem to me to come from afar, and I do not believe they ever heard of this lady, and they know nothing of her, rather are their thoughts bent on other things than these here, for perhaps they are thinking of their distant friends, whom we know not." And he wrote the following sonnet:

Ah! pilgrims, who so thoughtful walk and slow,
Intent perhaps on nothing near at hand,
Come ye indeed from such a distant strand

As your impassive faces seem to show,
 Which are not wet with tears, the while ye go
 Right through the saddest city of the land
 Like foreign men, who seem to understand
 Nothing whatever of the city's woe ?
 In sooth my sighing heart is sure of this:
 That if, to hear, your journey ye defer,
 Ye shall not then depart without a tear.
 Our mourning town hath lost its Beatrice!
 And every word which men may speak of her
 Hath power to turn to sorrow those who hear.

Between these two songs of placid grief lies a troubled experience, which shall form the subject of our last chapter — the compassionate glances of a youthful person seen at a window, and the growth and eventual subjugation of Dante's affection for her. The *New Life* ends with the final triumph of Beatrice after death, as it began with her first victory on earth. The last poem of the book tells how Dante's thought, piercing the nine material skies, — even the outermost and greatest, which surrounds all the others, — rises into the Heaven of spirit, the true Paradise, where it beholds Beatrice in glory.

Beyond the sphere which loftiest doth aspire
 Passes the sigh that issues from my breast;
 A new intelligence which Love, distrest,
 Confers upon it, drives it ever higher.
 When it has reacht the goal of its desire,

It sees a lady, honored by the blest,
 And shining so that, blindingly imprest,
 The pilgrim spirit lingers to admire.
 It sees her such that I its meaning miss
 When it describes, it speaks a sound so faint
 Unto the grieving heart, which bids it tell;
 I know it speaketh of that gentle saint,
 Because it often nameth Beatrice;
 And that, dear ladies mine, I hear full well.

“After this sonnet,” Dante continues,” appeared to me a wondrous vision, in which I beheld things which made me resolve to say nothing more of this blessed one, until such time as I should be more worthy to treat of her. And to this end am I striving with all my might, even as she verily doth know. Wherefore, if it shall be the pleasure of Him by whom all things live, that my life last a few years, I hope to say of her that which never was said of any woman.” The monument thus lovingly conceived, so profoundly planned, and erected with such toil and such incomparable skill — the *Divina Commedia* — remains to this day unapproached by any other work of art dedicated to woman.

In Dante’s *Comedy* the “blessed one,” as we have seen, plays the part of divine revelation, guide to beatitude. But it is not with the Beatrice of the great masterpiece that we have to deal just now: our concern is with the “most gentle” lady of the *New Life* and of the lyrics not comprised in that “little book.” Is Beatrice

already a symbolic figure in these? Is she merely a woman, idealized and angelic, or is she the impersonation of something abstract? A similar problem confronted us with regard to *Pietra*; and in her case, while we were undecided, the absence of any indication of mystic intent inclined us to the negative.

To a certain extent the *Vita Nuova* is evidently symbolistic, with its personification of love, its doctrine of the occult significance of names and numbers, and, after the author's change of style, its attribution of supernatural qualities to the beloved. So far, all are agreed. Beyond this point, however, opinions are very diverse. According to some, the "little book" is simply an autobiography, discreet, veiled, made up of details selected in view of a preconceived plan, a plan devised to give the impression of unity; yet fundamentally true. In the opinion of others, the *New Life* is a sentimental novel, containing, no doubt, some real experiences, but essentially idealistic, invented by the author to illustrate his idea of feminine grace and platonic love. Others still are convinced that this same work is not only a novel but an allegorical novel, in which neither persons nor events have literal reality; as to the meaning of this allegory, however, they can hardly deny that it is somewhat vague and rather faintly suggested by the text. Finally, some maintain that the incidents related by the poet are true, but that, when he composed his book, he wished to allegorize them or give them a

mystic sense, and that he arranged and more or less transformed them, to make them fit into the frame prepared for them. This opinion is strikingly set forth by Professor J. B. Fletcher in his volume on *Dante* and elsewhere.

Which of these hypotheses is the right one? Is it possible to find an explanation that shall combine two methods of interpretation — for instance, the first and the last, the literal and the literal-mystical? Let us examine more closely the work itself. We find in it, to start with, a series of thirty-one poems, which form, so to speak, its skeleton, the bits of prose being fitted about them. Furthermore, these poems are more or less systematically arranged; for the twenty-eight sonnets and other short pieces cluster about the three long *canzoni* which dominate the central part of the book. The plan of the *Vita Nuova* is, then, very definitely and artistically designed. But there is another principle of disposition. The author plainly implies (and we have no adequate reason to question the correctness of his implication) that the sequence of the poems is in accord with their chronological order. What Dante professes to offer us, in this book, is a series of poems selected from the verses written by him between the ages of seventeen and twenty-seven or twenty-eight. These poems, we may safely infer, were already in circulation, known and discussed by his friends and by the little literary public of Florence. It was probably towards 1293 or 1294,

some three or four years after the death of Beatrice, that the chosen pieces were gathered together by their author and surrounded with a prose commentary.

For a work of this sort Dante found a model in the Provençal song-books, in which are given biographical details concerning the writers of the texts. In particular, it has been convincingly argued by Professor P. Rajna (*Lo schema della Vita Nuova*, 1890) that the suggestion came from a manuscript of the works of Bertran de Born, which presents the warrior-poet's songs embedded in explanatory matter that forms a continuous narrative. We have reason to believe that such a manuscript was kept in Florence in the thirteenth century, and we know that Dante was familiar with Bertran de Born. The mingling of prose and poetry is found also in Boethius's famous treatise *On the Consolation of Philosophy*, the first book of secular philosophy studied by Dante, as he tells us in the *Banquet*; in this work, however, composed in prison while the author was awaiting death, the prose and the verse are presumably due to one continuous inspiration.

At the time when Alighieri conceived the plan of the *New Life*, he had read not only Boethius, but some of the philosophy of Cicero, and he had followed courses in theology; moreover, he had been matured by suffering and meditation. The Dante who wrote the autobiographical prose is, then, a very different Dante from the one who composed the poems (especially the earlier

ones) which this prose expounds. An erudite Dante is this commentator, serious, careful of his reputation, steeped in mysticism, full of Biblical images and of philosophical doctrine. What he desires above all is to justify his life before others and before his own conscience, to read into his juvenile verses a depth and unity which they were far from possessing, to bring all the emotions of his youth into harmony with the supernatural influence ultimately ascribed to Beatrice, to transform this gentle Florentine into an angel, to discover in all his relations with her the sign of heavenly predestination.

This purpose is responsible not only for some inconsistencies and obscurities, but also for a system of exegesis which discovers in each of the poems what the author would have put into it if he had written it at the same time as the prose. The vague presentiment of grief, expressed at the close of the first sonnet, becomes a foreboding of the death of Beatrice. The gallant verses addressed to other young damsels are attributed to fictitious attachments, invented to conceal his one true love. As we have just seen, two elegies on the death of an unnamed lady are explained as having been composed ostensibly for the mistress of a brother of Beatrice, but really for Beatrice herself. The new affection which, if we are to believe a group of four sonnets in the latter part of the *New Life*, began to usurp the place of the old love, is quickly vanquished and cast out—according to

the prose commentary; whereas the evidence of the *Banquet* and the *Divine Comedy* would seem to indicate a long duration.

The most curious example of this method occurs in the introduction to a little poem cited in the chapter on Matilda (p. 58), a sonnet which is manifestly nothing but a graceful compliment offered to two ladies, the second of these being his own Bice or Beatrice, the first a certain Vanna or Giovanna (that is, Joan), surnamed "Springtime," formerly dear to his friend, Guido Cavalcanti. In these pretty verses, which, in all likelihood, were widely known and therefore could not be overlooked in the *Vita Nuova*, the poet had to explain why the name of Beatrice is second and not first — an order originally due, no doubt, to the dedication of the sonnet to Guido. Here is Dante's explanation: "After this empty vision of mine [the feverish dream of the death of Beatrice], it came to pass that, as I was somewhere sitting thoughtful, I felt a quiver begin in my heart, as if I had been in the presence of this lady. Then, I declare, there came upon me a vision of Love; for I seemed to see him coming from the quarter where my lady dwelt, and it seemed to me that he spake to me joyously in my heart: 'Forget not to bless the day I took thee, for it is thy duty to do so.' And verily I seemed to have a heart so joyous that it did not seem to be mine, so strange was its condition. And a little after these words which my heart had said to me with the

tongue of Love, I saw coming toward me a gentle lady who was of famous beauty, and was once much loved by this first friend of mine. And the name of this lady was Joan, save that for her beauty's sake, so 't is thought, the name *Primavera* [Springtime] was bestowed upon her, and so she was called. Then, looking after her, I saw coming the wondrous Beatrice. These ladies passed near me thus, one after the other; and it seemed to me that Love spake in my heart, saying: 'That first one was named Primavera merely because of this coming to-day; for I inspired the giver of the name to call her *Primavera*, that is, *prima verrà* [she shall come before] on the first day on which Beatrice shall show herself after her liegeman's vision. And, shouldst thou care also to consider her first name, it is equivalent to Primavera; for her name, Joan, is from that John who preceded the true light, saying: "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord." ' Furthermore, it seemed to me that, after these words, he said: 'Whosoever should wish to consider closely, would call this Beatrice, *Love*, because of the great likeness she hath to me.' Wherefore I, reflecting afterwards, determined to write thereof in rime to my first friend, — withholding certain words which it seemed fit to withhold, — believing that his heart still contemplated the beauty of this gentle Primavera."

The more closely we examine the text of the *New Life*, the more clearly we perceive what extraordinary trouble

Dante has taken to adapt to his later mode of thought the poems and the events that gave rise to them. And that very effort, or rather the difficulty that necessitates it, is a proof that the events are real, not invented for this book; for, had they been fictitious, there would have been no difficulties, no contradictions, no incongruities, there would have been nothing to accommodate or to explain away, since all would have been conceived to suit the poet's idea.

If this conclusion is justified, it permits us to attempt to reconstruct sundry little episodes which the author has lightly sketched. Dante's habitual reticence makes us very eager for knowledge and very reluctant to let go any bit of information that he has allowed to escape. From time to time the *New Life* opens a perspective, all the more enticing for being veiled, and discreetly reveals some scene from the poet's inner life. "After this vision," we read, the vision being the inspiration of the very first sonnet, "my natural spirit began to be obstructed in its operation, because my mind was all given over to thought of this most gentle one; wherefore I became in a little while of such frail and weak condition that many friends were grieved by my looks, and many people, full of envy, already were trying to learn from me that which I desired wholly to hide from others. And I, understanding the mischievous questions they put to me, replied to them (at the bidding of Love, who commanded me in accord with the counsel of reason)

that Love was the one who had thus treated me. I spake of Love, because I bore in my face so many of his marks that this could not be concealed. And when they asked of me: 'For whom hath this Love so wasted thee?' then I looked at them and smiled, but said nothing to them."

Presently comes the scene of the church (p. 33) and the gentle lady who sits between Dante and Beatrice, an episode introduced to account for a series of amorous poems addressed to a young person otherwise unknown to us. After some time this lady had to leave Florence and go to dwell far from the city. A little later, "a thing came to pass which constrained me to depart from the aforesaid city and go toward those parts where was the gentle lady who had been my protection, although the goal of my journey was not so far away as she was. And albeit I was outwardly in the company of many [the occasion was probably a small military excursion against the Aretines], the journey displeased me so that my sighs could scarcely relieve the anguish which my heart felt, because I was withdrawing from my blessedness [from Beatrice, who remained in Florence]. Wherefore that very sweet Lord who governed me by the authority of the very gentle lady, appeared in my fancy, like a pilgrim lightly clad, and in mean garments. He seemed to me downcast, gazing at the ground, save that from time to time I thought his eyes strayed to a beautiful river, swift and very clear, which flowed along beside the road

where I was. Love seemed to call me, speaking these words: 'I come from that lady who hath been thy protection, and I know that her return will never be; and therefore I have with me the heart which I made thee keep with her, and I am taking it to a lady who shall be thy shelter, as the other was.' And he named her to me, so that I knew well who she was. 'But nevertheless, shouldst thou say aught of these words which I have spoken to thee, say it in such wise that naught through them be disclosed of the pretended love which thou hast shown to this woman and must needs show to another.'” In fact, the sonnet (p. 36) on which this commentary is written contains not a syllable of Beatrice, of beautiful Arno, nor of concealment or pretence. “And, having spoken these words, this form of my fancy vanished all at once, because of the very great share of himself which Love imparted to me. And with face almost transformed I rode that day right thoughtful and accompanied by many sighs.” Here we have Dante's later version of a shift of interest to still another lady, to whom his attentions were so persistent as to injure her reputation; wherefore Beatrice, as he tells us, “that most gentle one, destroyer of all vices and queen of virtues, passing through a certain place, denied me her very sweet salutation, in which consisted all my happiness.”

We have been present at that wedding banquet at which Dante, coming unexpectedly into the company of Beatrice, is so violently excited that he trembles and

almost swoons, whereat the ladies, with his beloved, laugh at his plight; and we have listened to his tuneful expostulations. We have overheard the conversation of a group of ladies (perhaps these same mocking ones) who, familiar with Dante's experiences and verses, criticize the tone of his poetry, and thus bring about his conversion to the "new style." Passing on to the latter part of the story, we have caught a glimpse of the poet "on that day on which was completed the year that this lady had become a citizen of life eternal." "I was sitting," he says, "in a place in which, recalling her, I was drawing an angel on certain tablets; and while I was drawing, I turned my eyes and saw beside me men to whom it was fitting to do honor." And thus did the poet address them:

That gentle one had come my thoughts amid
 (That lady dear who maketh Love to mourn)
The very hour when your desire was borne
By thought of her to watch the work I did.
Love, finding her within my memory hid,
 Awakened in my heart so anguish-worn,
And said unto my sighs: "Go forth forlorn!"
And each one sadly went as it was bid.
Then, weeping sore, they fluttered from my breast;
And still their doleful voice doth often bring
 The tears of pain into my joyless eyes.
But those which came with greatest suffering
Cried ceaselessly: "O noble spirit blest,
 'Tis now a year since thou to Heaven didst rise."

All these little incidents seem natural enough in themselves, and even more lifelike is another, of which we have caught as yet but a passing shadow — the scene of the sympathetic young person at the window. Yet something in the way of telling seems to shroud them in mystery, and we are left with an impression of unreality, wondering whether we are listening to fact or to fancy. This impression is, I think, due to two factors: to the author's discreet vagueness, which avoids precise indication of person, time, and place; and to his own underlying conviction of a mystic significance in everything that concerns Beatrice, a conviction that colors his language and leads him to emphasize coincidences and hidden meanings. It is this feature of his style that continually lures the reader in pursuit of an ever vanishing allegory.

Symbolistic the work is, in any case, as I have already said. And its most perplexing symbol — the most important, too, next to the God of Love — is the number nine, a mysterious token constantly attached to Beatrice. More than anything else, this insistence on the nine has tended to give the little autobiography a frankly allegorical, even a fantastic air. Let us examine the passages where this phenomenon occurs.

“Nine times already after my birth,” we have read at the beginning of the *New Life*, “the heaven of light had returned almost to the same point, in its own revolution, when first appeared to my eyes the glorious queen

of my mind It was, then, almost at the beginning of her ninth year that she appeared to me; and I saw her almost at the end of my ninth." We pass to the first greeting: "When so many days had gone by that exactly nine years were completed since the aforesaid appearance of this most gentle one, on the last of those days it came to pass that this wondrous lady appeared to me, clad in a pure white color, between two ladies who were of more advanced age; and, passing along a street, she turned her eyes toward that spot where I stood very timid; and in her ineffable courtesy, which is now rewarded in the great world, she greeted me so wonderfully that I seemed then to behold all the bounds of blessedness. The hour on which her sweetest salutation reached me was surely the ninth of that day; and inasmuch as that was the first time that her words had set forth to come to my ears, I received such sweetness that drunken-like I parted from men and took refuge in the solitude of a room of mine, and began to meditate on this most courteous one."

It was after this greeting that Dante composed his first sonnet, the one that he sent to various literary men, asking for their interpretation of his dream:

On every captive soul and gentle heart
Before whose eyes the present screed may go,
Greetings from Love, their Master, I bestow,
And beg, their judgment they to me impart.
Of all the time when stars display their art

The hours bethirded were, or nearly so,
When Love appeared before me, nothing slow.
At thought of him I still with horror start!
Joyous to see was Love, and he did keep
My heart within his hand, and in his arms
My Lady, lightly wrapt, in slumber deep.
Then on this burning heart, aroused from sleep,
He poorly fed her, deaf to her alarms.
And as he went away, I saw him weep.

The commentary adds several features not contained in the poem. For instance, the last line becomes: "After this, it was but a little while before his joyousness was turned to most bitter tears, and, thus weeping, he gathered up this lady in his arms, and with her seemed to me to depart toward Heaven" — with a plain suggestion of the lady's death. Now the curious and rather ambiguous phrase, "The hours bethirded were, or nearly so," meaning "the hours [of night] were reduced by nearly a third," is expanded thus: "And forthwith I began to think, and I found that the hour on which this vision had appeared to me had been the fourth of the night; wherefore it is clearly evident that it was the first hour of the nine last hours of the night." Unmistakable here is the ingenious effort of the author to introduce the number nine in a passage where this number was not in his mind when he wrote the sonnet.

In the three following cases the nine turns up in the prose without the slightest suggestion in the verses

which the prose expounds. In the first, Dante is relating a second vision and a colloquy with Love: "And having pronounced these words, he disappeared, and my sleep was broken. Then, recollecting, I found that this vision had appeared to me at the ninth hour of the day; and before leaving the aforesaid room, I resolved to write a ballad." Again, in a passage, already cited, preceding the dream of the death of Beatrice: "Some days after this, it came to pass that in a certain part of my person there fell upon me a painful illness, wherefrom I continually suffered for nine days very bitter pain"; and "on the ninth day" the delirious vision occurs. After her death, having yielded for some time to a growing love for the lady of the window, the poet is recalled to constancy by another dream of Beatrice: "Against this adversary of reason arose one day, almost at the ninth hour, a strong imagination within me; for I seemed to see this glorious Beatrice with those red garments in which she had first appeared to my eyes." Always the same story: no nine in the verses, appearance of this mysterious number in the prose, written considerably later.

The prose it is, too, which eventually explains to us the mystic significance of the curious obstinacy with which this number pursues Beatrice, from her first meeting with Dante until her death, and even later. This explanation is given immediately after the announcement of the passing of the "most gentle one,"

which comes while the poet is composing an ode in her honor: "I was still planning this *canzone*, and had completed the foregoing stanza of it, when the Lord of justice called this most gentle one to glory under the banner of that blessed Mary, whose name was in very great reverence in the words of this beatified Beatrice. And although it would perhaps befit the occasion to treat somewhat of her parting from us, it is not my intention to treat of it here, for three reasons." We may pass over the three reasons, which I have discussed elsewhere. "Nevertheless, inasmuch as the number nine hath many times had a place in the preceding words, seemingly not without reason, and in her parting this number appears to have had a great place, it is needful here to say something, for it seems to belong to the subject. Wherefore I shall first tell how it had a place in her parting, and then I shall assign some reason why this number was so friendly to her."

At last, then, we are to have a clue to the mystery. First let me say that the death of Beatrice occurred, as the following passage somewhat enigmatically tells us, on the evening of June 8, 1290; and the author sets himself the task of introducing the number nine as many times as possible into this date, where, to the uninitiated, it seems to "have a place" but once. From his handbook of astronomy — presumably the *Elementa Astronomica* of the Arab, Alfraganus — Dante learned that in the Syrian calendar June is the ninth month;

and that in Arabia the day begins at sunset, the close of the European June 8 thus becoming the start of the Arabian June 9. By utilizing this information he turned the one occurrence of nine into three.

“I declare,” he says, “that according to the usage of Araby her most noble soul departed in the first hour of the ninth day of the month; and according to the usage of Syria she departed in the ninth month of the year, for the first month is there Tisrin First, which is our October. And according to our usage she departed in that year of our indiction (that is, of the years of our Lord) in which the perfect number [ten] was nine times completed in that century in which she was placed in this world; and she was one of the Christians of the thirteenth century [in other words, she died in the nine-times-tenth year of the thirteenth century of our era]. Why this number was so friendly to her, the following might be a reason: forasmuch as, according to Ptolemy and according to Christian truth, nine are the heavens that move, and, according to common astrological opinion, the aforesaid heavens operate here below in accordance with their relation to one another, this number was friendly to her to show that in her generation all nine moving heavens were in perfect harmony together. This is one reason for it; but, considering more subtly and in accordance with infallible truth, this number was she herself — I mean figuratively, and I understand it thus: the number three is the root of nine, because,

without any other number, by itself it makes nine, as we plainly see that three times three is nine. Therefore if three is by itself the maker of nine, and the Maker of miracles by himself is three (to wit, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, which are three and one), this lady was accompanied by the number nine to show that she was a nine, that is, a miracle, whose root is the wondrous Trinity alone. Perhaps by a subtler person could be found in this a still subtler reason; but this is the one that I see and like best."

We are finally enlightened concerning the function of nine; that is, we know what Dante meant by this number when he was writing the prose of the *New Life*. We must admit that this passage is not one of the most successful in the work and that it leaves us somewhat disappointed. Why has the author taken such elaborate pains to dwell on a symbol that seems to us both obscure and superfluous? Let us not forget that the *New Life* is not only a eulogy but, at the same time, an apology: while it is a collection of versified praise of Beatrice by Dante, with a prose commentary intended to heighten its effect, it is also an attempt to give a favorable sense to all the author's previous poems which might have seemed disloyal, whether these poems were or were not contained in the book. Furthermore, let us remember that in the explanation of a certain sonnet in which the name of Giovanna, Cavalcanti's former sweetheart, precedes the name of Beatrice, Dante attributes this

priority to the etymological meaning of the first name. Suppose, for a moment, that he had not had at his disposal this fantastic etymology: what could he have said to excuse himself? Perhaps he would have maintained that the second place is in some respects more honorable than the first — rather a difficult contention, in view of the great importance of *one* in scholastic philosophy and the lesser insistence on *two*. If, instead of *two*, the poet had had to do with a *three* or a *nine*, his argument would have been notably easier and stronger.

It is in this direction, I believe, that we must look for the origin of the numerical intruder, of this nine which is justified by nothing in the verses collected by the author. We must find in Dante's poems or experiences an occasion on which Beatrice, later to be elevated to absolute sovereignty, occupies temporarily an inferior position. If her place should by chance turn out to be the *ninth*, it would be a token that we were on the right path. For the best method of reconciling an apparent momentary inferiority with the real primacy of the beloved would be to prove: (1) that nine, the symbol of divine wonder, is the logical representative of the wondrous Beatrice; and (2) that the mysterious affinity between this number and the lady is shown by the continual intervention of the nine in her affairs.

Now, this supposititious condition is realised in one of the chapters of the *New Life*, a short, unobtrusive chapter, which apparently has nothing to do with the

rest. It tells of a *serventese* written by the youthful poet, a work which unfortunately has not come down to us, having perhaps been suppressed by the author. In passing, we may observe that the term *serventese* is applied in Italian to a certain metrical form, instead of designating, as in Provençal, the contents of the composition. Here is the chapter in question, a passage upon which I touched in speaking of the flower-ladies: "I declare that at the time when this lady [the lady of the church] was the screen of such great love on my side, a desire came upon me to try to record the name of this most gentle one, and to accompany it with many ladies' names, and especially with the name of this gentle lady. And, taking the names of the sixty most beautiful ladies of the city where my lady was placed by the Most High, I composed an epistle in *serventese* form, which I shall not copy; nor should I have made mention of it, except to tell the marvelous thing that happened when I was writing it, namely, that my lady's name would consent to stand in no other place than the ninth among the names of these ladies."

According to the hypothesis which I venture to present, the epistle containing this list was written by Dante before the supremacy of Beatrice, at a time when she shared with divers other damsels the young poet's admiration. This poem, being fairly well known in Florence and much discussed by the society which the author frequented, proved to be a serious obstacle when

Dante tried to convince himself and to persuade others that he had always lived under the influence of Beatrice. Hence the supernatural explanation of the ninth place accorded to her in the *serventese*, an explanation which eventually entailed all the mystic development of the nine. If I am right, it was, then, a real and trifling incident that led to this puzzling piece of exalted symbolism.

Recent criticism has perhaps discovered in one of Dante's famous sonnets, not comprised in the *New Life*, an allusion to the lost epistle. The poem is one already cited (p. 57), the so-called "Boat of Love," addressed to Guido Cavalcanti. There we find three female figures: Vanna, cherished by Guido; Lagia, presumably the sweetheart of Lapo Gianni; and a third, unnamed, who is "on number thirty" — which may mean that she is thirtieth among the sixty fair ladies of Florence. This third, then, who would seem to have been the maiden of Dante's choice when the sonnet was written, cannot be Beatrice, who was number nine.

V. LISETTA

IN treating of Beatrice we had to discuss the question whether the *Vita Nuova* is an allegory or a superficially symbolistic piece of writing — a problem which the author leaves us to solve for ourselves as best we may. It is not the same with the *Convivio*, or *Banquet*, an unfinished didactic work, whose allegorical intention is explicitly stated. The *Banquet* was to have consisted of fifteen parts: to wit, an introduction, and fourteen treatises made up of discursive comment on fourteen of the author's *canzoni*, poems which, already published, had been misinterpreted by his friends. It is apparent that the fundamental conception of this work has some likeness to that of the *Vita Nuova*; but the *Convivio*, probably written between 1304 and 1308, when Dante, from thirty-nine to forty-three years old, had acquired nearly all the knowledge accessible to his generation, is composed in a thoroughly utilitarian spirit, for the purpose of instructing mankind in the principles of philosophy, politics, and most of the sciences. This great composition, presumably broken off by the coronation of the emperor Henry VII and his descent into Italy, contains in fact only the introduction and the commentary on three poems — that is, four out of the fifteen books planned. What we have makes us wish for more.

In the introduction we find a very curious and occasionally eloquent discourse in praise of the vulgar tongue. Extremely interesting is also the glowing defence of the Empire, which forms the most conspicuous feature of the fourth book. Equally precious to the specialist are the lessons in astronomy and in metaphysics that throw so much light on the *Divine Comedy* and on all the psychology of the Middle Ages.

These things we must pass over. We cannot, however, leave unnoticed a touching personal cry, one of the exceedingly rare passages in which Dante complains of his own misfortunes. "Alas!" he exclaims, "would it had pleased the Director of the universe that the occasion for my apology had never existed! For, in that case, neither would others have sinned against me nor should I have unjustly suffered punishment — I mean the punishment of exile and poverty. Ever since it was the pleasure of the citizens of Florence, the very beautiful and very famous daughter of Rome, to cast me out of her sweetest bosom, in which I was born and bred up to the middle point of life, and in which, with their good will, I long with all my heart to rest my weary mind and end the time allotted me, — ever since then I have wandered as a stranger, almost as a beggar, through nearly all the regions over which this language extends, revealing against my will fortune's wound, for which the blame ofttimes unjustly falls upon the wounded one. Verily have I been a ship without sail or helm, carried to

divers harbors and river mouths and shores by the dry wind that rises from painful poverty." We find the same lament put by the author into the mouth of his ancestor, Cacciaguida, who, in the midst of the elect in the heaven of Mars, predicts the poet's exile:

“ As once Hippolytus from Athens fled,
 By cruel Phædra's mean devices caught,
 Thus, far from Florence thou shalt make thy bed.
 This is desired, already this is sought,
 And shortly by the schemer shall be done
 Who plots where Christ is daily sold and bought.
 The blame shall fall upon the injured one,
 As ever here below, till truth be shown
 By punishment which truth itself hath spun.
 Whatever thing thou callest all thine own,
 Most dearly loved, must thou forsake and spurn:
 First arrow this from exile's crossbow flown!
 How salty is the savor, thou shalt learn,
 Of others' bread, and tramping up and down
 Another's stairs, how hard a track to turn.”

The *Banquet* is a book of exile, the work of a man who seeks in study and philosophy some consolation for the outrages of fortune and the slanders of men, who returns good for evil by enlightening his fellows. What are the poems he chose as the texts of his lessons? We know only the three actually included. The first and second *canzoni*, *Voi che intendendo il terzo ciel movete* and *Amor che nella mente mi ragiona*, are love-songs, the first

describing the struggle between the old affection for Beatrice and a new interest that is finally victorious, the second singing the triumph of the latter; they seem to continue that series of sonnets, in the *New Life*, which has to do with the compassionate lady of the window. The third *canzone*, *Le dolci rime d'amor*, absolutely different from the other two, though outwardly connected with them, is the versified disquisition on nobility previously mentioned (p. 92). Unhappily we have no clue to the remaining eleven poems selected by the author for elucidation; we do not even know whether they are among Dante's extant works. On the other hand, some observations he lets fall justify the belief that his choice was already made and that the general plan of the work was outlined. Moreover, we learn that the author had plotted out his Latin treatise *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, likewise unfinished; for he tells us, toward the beginning of the *Banquet*, in speaking of the swift transformation of dialects: "This subject will be treated more fully elsewhere, in a book that I intend to write, with God's permission, on vernacular composition." The *Convivio* mentions also the *Vita Nuova*, its elder by some ten years. "If," says the author, "in the present work, which is called *Banquet* (and I hope it may prove to be one) the style appears more virile than that of the *New Life*, I nevertheless have no intention of discrediting the latter in any way, but rather of supporting it; inasmuch as it is reasonable that the one should be

hot and passionate, the other temperate and manly.” Let us remember, then, that the author of the *Banquet* does not discard the ideas of the *New Life*, but proposes to lend them new dignity by adapting them to the philosophy of his maturity. As to the title, *Convivio*, it means a banquet of knowledge to which Dante invites his readers, the poems being served as meats, the commentary as bread.

Although the *Banquet* was composed with the philanthropic intention of sharing with the public the intellectual food stored up by the author, the book has also another purpose, a strictly personal one, which is carefully explained. After having discussed at length the conditions under which it is proper to praise one's self, Dante adds these words, some of which I have cited before (p. 103): “My motive [in discussing my own work] is fear of infamy, and also desire to give instruction which verily no one else can give. I fear the infamy of having followed such a passion as the reader of the aforesaid odes conceives to have ruled over me; which infamy is removed by my present complete account of myself, which proves that not passion but virtue was the moving cause. I intend also to show the true meaning of these songs, which cannot be seen by some unless I tell it, because it is hidden under the figure of allegory. And this will give not only good pleasure to hear, but subtle teaching both in this style of composition and in this style of interpreting the writings of others.” We

have already considered Dante's explanation of the allegorical method (p. 68).

Was it Dante's intention to apply this method to the Pietra songs? What would we not give to find out? Unhappily we are condemned to ignorance. The only poems that we know to have been chosen for this treatment belong to the series of the lady of the window, a series which comprises four sonnets in the *New Life*, two odes in the *Banquet*, and apparently some other bits of verse not included in either of these works.

That is the group of poems which we are now to examine. It is a little more than a year after the death of Beatrice that the sympathetic young person in question appears for the first time. "Somewhat later," says the author, "being in a spot where I was recalling the past, I was very thoughtful, and with such painful thoughts that they made me outwardly show a look of fearful dejection. Wherefore I, observing my transformation, raised my eyes to see whether any one beheld me. Then I saw a gentle lady, very young and beautiful, who from a window appeared to be looking at me right compassionately, so that all compassion seemed to be collected in her. Wherefore, inasmuch as the unhappy, on seeing others sorrow for them, are the more readily moved to tears, as if pitying themselves, I felt my eyes then begin to desire to weep; and therefore, fearing to disclose my weakness, I withdrew from before the eyes of this gentle one. And then I said to myself:

'It cannot be that most noble love abide not with that compassionate lady.' And therefore I resolved to write a sonnet, in which I should speak to her and should include all that has been told in this explanation." Here is the sonnet:

My eyes beheld compassionate distress
Unstinted in thy gentle face appear
When thou didst watch my acts and bearing here,
Which oftentimes my anguish did confess.
Then saw I clear enough that thou couldst guess
The darkness of my whole existence drear,
And in my heart there rose a sudden fear
Of showing through my eyes my feebleness.
Forthwith I fled from thee, for tears did leap:
I felt them gushing upwards from my heart,
Which, seeing thee, was so disquieted.
And then within my grieving soul I said:
"Surely from her that love doth never part
Which thus compelleth me to walk and weep."

"Afterwards," continues Dante, "it came to pass that this lady, wherever she saw me, took on a compassionate expression and a pallid hue, like that of love, and therefore did often remind me of my most noble lady, who always showed herself of similar color. And verily, oftentimes, not being able to weep nor relieve my sadness, I would go to see this compassionate lady, who seemed to draw the tears out of my eyes by her presence. And therefore I had once more a desire to write words addressed to her." The words were these:

Love's color never did possession take —
Nor sweet compassion's look — so wondrously
Of any lady's face (who oft did see
Of gentle eyes and doleful tears the ache)
As they have thine possessed, and pallid make,
Whene'er my cheerless self appears to thee.
By thee inspired, a thought disturbeth me,
So violent, I fear my heart will break.
My deathly stricken eyes I cannot stay
From gazing at thee time and time again;
For they would weep, and constantly do try.
Of their desire thou dost increase the pain,
And they, for longing, wholly waste away,
But cannot shed a tear when thou art nigh.

“I came to such a pass for seeing this lady that my eyes began to take too much delight in beholding her; whereat was I oftentimes enraged at heart, and held myself as weak indeed. And many times I cursed the fickleness of mine eyes, and said to them in my thought: ‘Lo! ye were wont to bring tears to those who saw your grievous state; and now ye seem to wish to forget it for the sake of this lady who gazes on you, and who gazes on you only because she mourns for the glorious lady for whom ye used to weep. But do what ye may, I shall recall her to you very often, accursed eyes; for never, save after death, should your tears have ceased.’ And when I had thus spoken within me to my eyes, the sighs would assail me, deep and agonizing. And lest this battle which I had with myself should remain unknown

to all but the wretch who experienced it, I resolved to write a sonnet, and to include therein this horrible condition."

"The bitter tears that ye were wont to shed
For such a weary season, O mine eyes,
Made pitying tears to other eyelids rise,
As ye have seen and I to you have said.
But now methinks ye would forget, instead,
If I my recreant self should so despise
As not to spur you on in every wise,
Reminding you for whom ye sorrowèd.
It saddens me, the frailty ye display,
And shakes me so that greatly frighteneth
A lady's face, who you doth oft espy.
For never, never should ye, save for death,
Forget our lady, who hath passed away."
Thus speaks my heart, and then it heaves a sigh.

"The sight of this lady brought me into such a strange condition that many times I thought of her as one whom I liked too well. And I thought of her thus: 'This is a gentle lady, beautiful, young, and discreet, appearing perhaps at Love's behest, that my life may be at peace.' And many times I thought more lovingly, until my heart yielded to him, or to his argument. And when it had thus consented, I would bethink myself, as if moved by reason, and say to myself: 'Ah! what a thought is this, which seeks to comfort me in such mean fashion, and scarcely permits me to think of aught

else ? ’ Then another thought would arise, saying: ‘ Now that thou hast been in such tribulation, why wilt thou not escape from all this bitterness ? Thou seest that this is an inspiration, brought before us by Love’s desires, and coming from such a gentle quarter as the eyes of the lady who hath shown herself so compassionate to us.’ Wherefore I, having thus more than once striven within me, wished again to write some words thereof; and inasmuch as the battle of the sighs was won by those which spake for her, it seemed to me fitting to speak to her. And I wrote this sonnet, which begins ‘ A gentle thought ’; and I say ‘ gentle ’ in so far as it spake to a gentle lady, for otherwise it was very mean.”

A gentle thought, which whispereth of thee,
Comes hither oftentimes with me to dwell,
And doth of love so sweet a story tell,
It makes my heart surrender utterly.
Then speaketh soul to heart: “ Pray, who is he
That comes and cheers our stricken mind so well,
And hath a magic power so strong and fell
That not another thought may bide with me ? ”
“ O timid soul,” the heart to her replies,
“ This is a child of Love, a newborn sprite,
Who unto me his young affection brings.
And his existence here and all his might
Proceeded from a pitying lady’s eyes,
Whose face was troubled by our sufferings.”

“ Against this adversary of reason there arose one day, almost at the ninth hour, a strong imagination

within me; for I thought I saw this glorious Beatrice with those blood-red garments in which she first appeared to my eyes, and she seemed to me young, of an age like to that at which first I saw her. Then I began to think of her; and, as I brought her back to mind, according to the order of past time, my heart began painfully to repent of the desire by which thus weakly it had allowed itself to be possessed for a few days, contrary to the constancy of reason; and, banishing this evil desire, all my thoughts turned again to their most gentle Beatrice. And I declare that from then on I began with all my shamed heart to think of her so that sighs often revealed it, since almost all of them, as they went forth, said what was spoken in the heart, to wit, the name of this most gentle one and how she parted from us. And ofttimes it came to pass that some thought had such pain within it that I forgot both the thought and the place where I was. By this rekindling of sighs was rekindled my suspended weeping in such wise that my eyes seemed like two things which should desire only to weep; and often it came to pass that with the long duration of weeping there came around them a purple color, which is wont to appear for some agony that one suffers. Thus is it evident that they were aptly repaid for their fickleness, since henceforth they could look on no one who should so gaze at them as to lead them into like attachment. Wherefore, wishing that this evil desire and vain temptation should be shown so

destroyed that no doubt could be induced by the rimed words which I had written before, I resolved to make a sonnet in which I should include the substance of this explanation." In the sonnet, *Lasso! per forza de' molti sospiri*, there is no mention of the lady of the window, and we hear no more of her in the *Vita Nuova*.

In all this there is nothing to suggest an allegorical personage. On the contrary, one would say that this is the most realistic part of the *New Life*. The detail of the window, for instance, does not look like an invention and scarcely admits of a symbolistic interpretation. Then, too, the psychological development: the despairing poet's interest aroused by a young girl's sympathy, the longing to see her again and the comfort derived from expectation of the meeting, the fear of seeming faithless to his dead beloved, his self-reproach, his efforts not to fall in love, with the usual outcome of such a struggle, the consciousness that resistance is vain, the joy of this new affection which attaches him once more to life (a harmless enough affection, no doubt, guilty as it appeared to him), finally the sudden facing about, the triumph of the ideal, the return to Beatrice — all this surely gives the impression of a real experience, a bit of actual life.

In fact, there are some critics who go so far as to conjecture that the compassionate girl was not only a real person, but one known to us — no other than Gemma Donati, who, some four or five years after the incident

of the window, became Dante's wife. To this interesting hypothesis there are several objections. In the first place, we possess evidence which appears to show that Dante had been affianced to Gemma from childhood; in which case it is difficult to believe that he would have been forming a romantic attachment for her at such a late day. Moreover, we may infer, from his general practice, that he would have deemed it incongruous, if not improper, to introduce a semi-conjugal affection into this daintily idealistic tale of his love for Beatrice. His family affairs he always kept in the background. Nowhere, in all his works, does he mention his wife or his children. Of his parents he says nothing, save that they spoke Italian. According to the taste of his time, one's own ordinary family emotions are too personal to figure in a work of art.

Nevertheless I am convinced that the perplexing creature is a genuine woman. There is, indeed, a bare possibility that we have discovered how she was called: Lisetta. At least, this name occurs in a sonnet by Dante, not included in the *New Life*, but apparently connected with the group just examined. A charming lady, it tells us, passes through the road that beauty travels to awaken love — namely, through the eyes; but, on reaching the tower of the will, she hears a voice that sends her away — the voice of the real queen of Dante's heart.

Along the double path where beauties flow
When, waking Love, into the mind they press,
Lisetta marches, all misgivingless,
And thinks to capture me without a blow.
As soon as she has come the tower below
Which opens when the soul within says "yes,"
A sudden voice that damsel doth address:
"No seat is here for thee, fair lady. Go!"
For she who now so queenly sits above,
Once to obtain the wand of empire tried,
And quickly got it from the hand of Love.
Seeing herself sent back to whence she came,
Excluded from the place where Love doth bide,
Lisetta runs away, all red with shame.

Although the tone of these verses is entirely different from that of the sonnets in the *New Life*, the situation is identical. The playful, somewhat mocking style of the poem explains clearly enough why we do not find it admitted to the collection. Moreover, the mention of the woman's name would surely have sufficed to condemn it; and, in fact, there exists another version in which *Lisetta* is replaced by *una donna*, "a lady." The whimsicality which so absolutely differentiates this sonnet from the preceding ones will be observed again in a later poem of the series.

Up to this point there is nothing to make us suspect an allegorical intention. And yet the author of the *Banquet* gives us to understand that the poems of this

group have a hidden sense, and that his public is mistaken in thinking that their motive is passion rather than virtue. Now let us consider the first ode of the *Banquet*, the earliest poem for which Dante actually does furnish an allegorical interpretation. It is addressed, not, like the first ode of the *New Life*, to "ladies who have understanding of love," but to the angels who preside over the revolution of the third heaven, the sphere of Venus — to the celestial beings themselves, whose earthly symbols are these same ladies of the *Vita Nuova*.

Ye who by thought the sphere of Venus turn,
Now listen to the discourse in my heart,
Too strange to tell to anyone but you.
The sky which follows your celestial art —
Since all material instruments ye spurn —
Hath brought me to a state I never knew;
Therefore, when I my altered life review,
My story seems to suit but you alone.
I beg you, gentle creatures, listen well!
The strange adventure of my heart I'll tell,
How sadly doth the soul within it moan,
And how a spirit takes the other side,
Which seems adown your stellar rays to glide.

The life which made my doleful heart rejoice
Was once a kindly thought that often went
To sit beside your heavenly Master's feet,
Where it beheld a lady eminent,

Whose glory it described with dulcet voice
And made the soul exclaim: "To go were sweet!"
Now cometh one who maketh it retreat,
And ruleth o'er me with so high a hand,
My palpitating heart its fear betrays;
He bids me on another lady gaze.
"Who wishes blessedness to understand
Must look," he says, "upon this lady's eyes,
Unless he fear the agony of sighs."

A foeman he hath found who strikes him dead —
That humble thought that used my soul to fill
With praises of an angel crowned in Heaven.
My soul laments, her pain so smarteth still,
Crying: "Ah! woe is me! how he is fled,
That pitying one, who solace oft hath given!
Those eyes of mine!" she sobs, all anguish-driven,
"Unlucky hour, when they by her were seen,
And listened not to what I did reveal!
I said to them: 'Surely her eyes conceal
The one who slays my sister-souls, I ween.'
For all my foresight, they have lookt on one
So murderous that I to death am done."

"Thou art not dead, but only sore alarmed,
O soul of ours, whose words are full of woe!"
A gentle little sprite of Love doth speak.
"For this fair Lady, whom thou drestest so,
With such transforming power thy life hath charmed,
Thou canst not bear it, being grown so weak.
Just see how pitiful she is, and meek,

Discreet and kind, despite her high estate!
Now yield thee wholly to her sovereignty;
For, if thyself thou blind not, thou shalt see
The majesty of miracles so great
That thou shalt say: 'O Love, true Master mine,
Do what thou wilt, for all I am is thine!' "

My song, there shall be few enough, I know,
Who, guessing at thy meaning, do not err,
So wearisome and hard thou speakest it.
If, then, by any chance it should occur
That thou before such men and women go
As do not seem to understand thy wit,
I beg thee, lose thy courage not a bit,
But say to them, my latest, dearest air:
"Ye must have seen at least that I am fair."

In the words of the envoy,

My song, there shall be few enough, I know,
Who, guessing at thy meaning, do not err,

we find a plain suggestion of a hidden significance. The double meaning, which but few unaided readers can guess, is amply unfolded by the author in his prose commentary. After having defined the three varieties of mystic interpretation, he proceeds to give us first the literal, then the allegorical explanation of the poem. The literal runs as follows: "After the passing of that beautiful Beatrice, who liveth in Heaven with the angels and on earth with my soul, the planet of Venus had twice revolved in its own circle, which, according

to the two different periods, maketh it appear as evening and morning star, when that gentle lady, of whom I made mention at the close of the *New Life*, first came before my eyes accompanied by Love, and took some place in my mind. And, as hath been explained by me in the aforesaid little book, rather by her gentleness than by my choice it came to pass that I consented to be hers; for she showed herself so stirred by pity for my widowed life that the spirits of my eyes became her fast friends. And, having become thus friendly, they then so wrought within me that my will was satisfied to wed itself to her image. But inasmuch as love doth not come forth and grow and attain perfection in a moment, but requireth some time and food of thoughts, especially if there be contrary thoughts that obstruct it, there had to be, ere this new love should be complete, a long battle between the thought that fed it and the one that opposed it, which latter still held, in behalf of the glorious Beatrice, the fortress of my mind; for the one was continually reinforced from the front, the other, by the memory, from the rear. And the succor from the front, unlike the other, increased every day, preventing in some measure the sight from turning backward. All this seemed to me so wonderful, and at the same time so hard to endure, that I could not bear it, and crying aloud, as it were, to excuse myself for my strange condition, in which I appeared to be lacking in constancy, I directed my voice in that quarter whence proceeded

the victory of the new thought, which was victorious indeed, like a celestial power; and I began to sing: 'Ye who by thought the sphere of Venus turn.' " Then follows a detailed analysis of the *canzone*. For the discrepancy in dates between this narrative and that in the *Vita Nuova* an ingenious explanation has been offered by Professor J. E. Shaw (*Dante's 'Gentile Donna,'* in the *Modern Language Review*, x, 129 and 320).

We pass to the symbolistic interpretation. "Inasmuch as the literal sense hath been sufficiently shown, I must proceed to the allegorical and true exposition. Beginning, then, once more, I declare that when the first joy of my soul was lost, whereof mention hath been made above, I was left wounded with such woe that no consolation did help me. Nevertheless, after some time, my mind, which was striving to be well, bethought itself, since neither my own comforting nor another's availed, of returning to the method of self-consolation followed by some disconsolate ones in the past; and I began to read that book of Boethius, unknown to many, in which, outcast and imprisoned, he had comforted himself; and learning, furthermore, that Tully had written another book in which, treating of *Friendship*, he had uttered words for the consolation of Lælius, a most excellent man, for the death of his friend Scipio, I began to read that. And although it was hard for me at first to enter into their meaning, I finally penetrated it as far as the art of grammar which I possessed, and a little under-

standing of my own, could go; by means of which understanding I already had discerned, as it were in a dream, many things, as may be seen in the *New Life*. And, as it often happens that a man goeth in search of silver and beyond his expectation findeth gold, presented by some hidden cause, perhaps not without divine command, so I, seeking to console myself, found not only remedy for my tears, but words of authorities and sciences and books, pondering on which I was assured that philosophy, mistress of these authorities, sciences, and books, was a thing supreme. And I imagined her fashioned as a gentle lady; nor could I picture her in any act save one of mercy. Wherefore did my sense contemplate her verily with such satisfaction that I scarcely could turn it from her. And from this imagining I began to go where she did show herself in very truth, namely, to the schools of the churchmen and the disputations of philosophers; so that in a short time, perhaps in thirty months, I began so to feel her sweetness that love of her drove forth and destroyed every other thought. Wherefore I, feeling myself taken from the thought of the first love to the power of this, opened, as in wonder, my lips to the discourse of the foregoing song, revealing my state under the figure of other things. For of the lady with whom I was falling in love no rime of any vernacular was worthy to speak openly, nor were my hearers sufficiently well prepared to have so easily understood my undisguised speech, nor

would their credence have been given to the true meaning as to the fictitious; for it was truly and fully believed that I was inclined to the one love, which was not believed of the other. I began, therefore, to sing: 'Ye who by thought the sphere of Venus turn.' "

What are we to think of this apparent contradiction? Have we been mistaken about the reality of the woman whom we have somewhat fancifully named Lisetta? Or did Dante himself attempt to deceive us when he made her a symbol of philosophy? Let us run over rapidly the other poems that look as if they might belong to the same group. The following ballad, which rather seems to attach itself to the four sonnets in the *New Life*, suggests no allegorical conceit:

Chorus

Ballad, attired as prudent messenger,
Go forth, without unduly lingering,
To that fair maid to whom I bid thee sing.
How feeble is my life, then tell to her.

Solo

First say to her: my eyes, which heretofore,
From gazing at her image angel-bright,
A wreath of fond desire were wont to wear,
Unable now to look upon her more,
Are so destroyed by Death with sudden fright,
They ring themselves with garlands of despair.
Alas! to gladden them, I know not where

To turn them. Thou shalt find me nearly dead,
If I by her shall not be comforted,
So speak beseeching words, her heart to stir.

The figure of wreaths around the eyes occurs, in the *New Life*, in a sonnet on Beatrice, immediately following and continuing the four that are inspired by the compassionate lady (p. 156).

The sonnets, *Dagli occhi della mia Donna si muove* and *Chi guarderà mai senza paura*, may be provisionally comprised in our group; and, if thus classified, may be understood as referring either to a real woman or to Lady Philosophy. In the first, there comes from a certain woman's eyes a light which reveals things too strange and too divine to describe; the dazzled poet, intimidated, resolves never to see her more; but soon, forgetting his promises, sets forth again to seek her. The second tells how the terrifying eyes of a "little maid," or *pargoletta*, have wounded the lover unto death, he having been chosen, from all mankind, as an example and warning to others. These two poems may perhaps be taken as marking the beginning of an allegorical vein in the series; a vein which appears to continue in the pretty ballad, *Io mi son pargoletta bella e nuova*. This speaks of an irresistible "little maid," who, appearing to the author as a miraculous tiny angel from on high, declares that she has descended to reveal to humanity the things of Heaven, her beauties being new to men and unintelligible to all save those "in whom

Love takes his place to give pleasure to other ”; but in the depths of her eyes there lurks some one who has dealt the poet a mortal wound. Two other sonnets, *E' non è legno di sì forti nocchi* and *Io maledico il dì ch' io vidi im prima*, which were translated in the chapter on Pietra (pp. 89, 90), seem, as I then said, to be most aptly referred to Lady Philosophy, and to belong to a later stage of her supremacy.

On the other hand, two odes, *Amor che muovi tua virtù dal cielo* and *Io sento sì d'amor la gran possanza*, convey such a direct impression of passion and despair that, if they stood alone, no one would ever suspect them of a secondary meaning. Taken in connection with the other verses, however, they present one doubtful feature: both of them attribute the insensibility of the lady to her extreme youth, a trait conspicuous in a couple of “Pargoletta” poems which, as we have just seen, are probably allegorical, the youthfulness of the beloved being apparently a symbol of the poet's inexperience in philosophy. Moreover, in the first of the aforesaid odes, *Amor che muovi*,—a prayer to the God of Love,—the young person is endowed with supernatural qualities; and the second, *Io sento sì*, which is a protest of utter devotion, contains in its envoy this peculiar instruction to the “beauteous song”: “If any gentleman invite or stop thee, before putting thyself in his power, examine whether thou canst make him of thy sect; and, if not, quickly forsake him.” A third *canzone*,

Ai fals ris, of the type called in Provençal *descort*, or “discord,” may possibly be classed with these two; but it has little importance, being more than anything else a metrical and linguistic feat, written as it is in three languages.

We come now to a ballad whose allegorical purpose is well-nigh unmistakable, *Voi che sapete ragionar d' amore*, the most curious poem of the group. It tells of a cruel and beautiful lady who, conscious that Love dwells in her eyes, keeps them for her own contemplation in her mirror, and will not permit others to gaze into them. Thus Philosophy hides her deep, alluring truths from the discouraged student.

Chorus

O ye who understand the speech of love,
Pray listen to a ballad full of pain,
Which telleth of the Lady of Disdain,
Who holds my heart with power from above.

I

She so despises him who looks on her,
She makes him bend his eyes to earth for dread;
For round about her own doth ever stir
Of cruelty the image pictured.
Within, they show a kindly shape, instead,
Which makes the gentle soul cry: “Pity me!”
A shape so wonderful and fair to see,
It pricks the heart and bids the sighs to move.

II

She seems to say: "I never shall be meek
To anyone who looks into mine eyes.
In them I bear the noble Lord they seek,
That archer who o'er me doth tyrannize."
I vow she hoards them as a precious prize,
That she alone may contemplate the two;
As I have heard that honest ladies do,
Who gaze upon themselves, their charms to prove.

III

I have no hope that she in mercy e'er
Shall deign to look on those whom she doth kill;
For she is cruel e'en as she is fair,
Who Love within her eyes caresseth still.
But let her keep and hide them as she will!
Some day I yet shall catch that saving sight;
For infinite desire shall give me might
To overcome the cold contempt of Love.

Surely this strange poem can be nothing but a whimsical allegory setting forth the pains and obstacles encountered by the impatient explorer of scholastic philosophy. At any rate, it is to this same ballad that reference is evidently made in the envoy of the second *canzone* of the *Banquet*, entitled *Amor che nella mente mi ragiona*.

My song, how different thy words appear
From those a sister thine presumes to speak!
This Lady, whom thou picturest so meek,

Thy sister "haughty" calls, in accents loud.
Thou know'st, the sky is ever bright and clear
And in itself is never dark or bleak;
But oft our eyes, for reasons near to seek,
Declare the sun is covered by a cloud.
Thus, when thy sister called the Lady "proud,"
It saw her only as she seemed to be,
Because the truth was not uncovered whole;
For timid was my soul,
And still so timid is, whate'er I see
Where she is watching, filleth me with dread. —
Now thus defend, if needful, thee and me!
And when thou canst, before her bow thy head
And say: "With thy permission, Lady fair,
I go to sing thy praises everywhere."

The ode which ends thus is an ecstatic hymn celebrating the triumph of the new love and the divine glory of her who inspires it. Even without Dante's warning, its tone and language are such as to suggest a mystic significance. It is the crowning poem of the series, and registers the highest point of exaltation in the poet's enthusiastic pursuit of philosophy. Here is the first strophe:

Love, who discourseth ever in my mind
About my dearest Lady longingly,
Doth often say such things of her to me,
My understanding cannot make them clear.
His dulcet song with such a spell doth bind
The listening soul that drinks his melody,

It cries: "Alas! Would I were strong and free
 To tell about my Lady what I hear!"
 If I would speak of what is said, I fear
 I must abandon, at the very start,
 What mine intelligence cannot conceive,
 And of the rest must leave,
 As far beyond my speech, too great a part.
 If, therefore, these my rimes be halt and lame,
 Which, praising her, shall use their utmost art,
 Our feeble human wit must bear the blame,
 And human language, which hath not the strength
 What Love declares of her to tell at length.

The *Banquet*, you remember, was left very far from finished. Some strong revulsion of feeling, some fundamental change of interest forced Dante to give up the undertaking on which he had spent so much labor and which he had begun with such zest. One manuscript of this great fragmentary work contains at the end, as it were an envoy, the following sonnet, composed in a key quite different from the exultant tone of the ode just cited.

O words, which thro' the world your way do learn,
 My latest born, since I began to sing,
 In praise of her who led me wandering,
 "Ye who by thought the sphere of Venus turn,"
 Go straight to her for whom I used to yearn,
 And let your cries proclaim your sorrowing;
 Then tell her: "We are thine! but not a thing
 Shalt get henceforth from one whom thou dost spurn."

Stay not with her, for Love abides not there,
But go about in mournful garb, as sweet
And piteous as your elder sisters were.
When ye shall find a lady good and fair,
Then cast yourselves right humbly at her feet,
And say: "We owe thee service everywhere."

A striking poem, which seems to show the weary and disillusioned student renouncing his quest of philosophic truth, and ready to dedicate to a worthier mistress, whoever she may be, the verses composed for that cruel lady. It was perhaps at that moment, in a crisis of discouragement, that Dante laid aside, never to take it up again, the ambitious enterprise of the *Banquet*.

Summing up the results of our search, we seem to have collected some eighteen poems which fit well enough into our group, although we have for only six of them the author's own assignment. The verses, as far as we can determine their order, arrange themselves in a series which, simple and literal at the start, soon betrays a symbolistic tendency, and ultimately turns to out and out allegory. If we consider in the mass all of Dante's poetry that is devoted to Beatrice, we shall see that it follows a similar course. This development appears, then, to have been in accord with the author's natural bent. First Dante's fancy is stirred by a real person; then, having come to regard this person as a symbol of something abstract, he little by little loses consciousness of the reality and consecrates himself to

the cult of the symbol. Having reached this last stage, he believes, or tries to persuade himself, that his whole experience has been an allegory. Thus the sympathetic little creature who, looking down from a window, inspired in the afflicted poet a sentimental affection, was transformed into Lady Philosophy, "daughter of God, queen of the universe." Lest such a metamorphosis seem to pass understanding, one must remember that Boethius, in his *Consolation of Philosophy*, Dante's first text-book of philosophic lore, personifies the consoling science as a marvelous woman. One must remember, also, that our poet, reduced to despair by the loss of Beatrice, was comforted at the same time by the study of philosophy and by the commiseration of a young girl.

We may conclude, then, that the author of the *Banquet* was right in attributing to the odes in that work an allegorical sense, and that his friends were equally justified in believing in the reality of the emotion which had inspired the sonnets in the *New Life*. The friends were mistaken, however, it would seem, in extending the realistic meaning to the whole series; and Dante, perhaps, was deceiving himself when he carried back the allegory to the episode described in the *Vita Nuova*. For, despite all efforts to reconcile the earlier and the later narrative, the statement in the *Convivio* still seems manifestly to imply that the incident is allegorical from the beginning, that the element of material love never en-

tered into it, and that the "gentle lady" is a symbolistic invention.

Was the author wholly sincere? Had he quite convinced himself? If so, we are somewhat at a loss to understand the reproaches addressed to him by the disembodied Beatrice, whom, on his mystic journey, he meets again in the Earthly Paradise, at the summit of the mountain of Purgatory. Here is the scene, as Longfellow translates it:

"Look at me well; in sooth I'm Beatrice!
How didst thou deign to come unto the Mountain?
Didst thou not know that man is happy here?"
Mine eyes fell downward into the clear fountain,
But, seeing myself therein, I sought the grass,
So great a shame did weigh my forehead down.
As to the son the mother seems superb,
So she appeared to me; for somewhat bitter
Tasteth the savour of severe compassion.
Silent became she, and the Angels sang
Suddenly, "*In te, Domine, speravi:*"
But beyond *pedes meos* did not pass.
Even as the snow among the living rafters
Upon the back of Italy congeals,
Blown on and drifted by Sclavonian winds,
And then, dissolving, trickles through itself
Whene'er the land that loses shadow breathes,
So that it seems a fire that melts a taper;
E'en thus was I without a tear or sigh,
Before the song of those who sing for ever

After the music of eternal spheres.
But when I heard in their sweet melodies
Compassion for me, more than had they said
“ O wherefore, lady, dost thou thus upbraid him ? ”
The ice, that was about my heart congealed,
To air and water changed, and in my anguish
Through mouth and eyes came gushing from my breast.
She, on the right-hand border of the car
Still firmly standing, to those holy beings
Thus her discourse directed afterwards:
“ Ye keep your watch in the eternal day,
So that nor night nor sleep can steal from you
One step the ages make upon their path;
Therefore my answer is with greater care
That he may hear me who is weeping yonder,
So that the sin and dole be of one measure.
Not only by the work of those great wheels,
That destine every seed unto some end,
According as the stars are in conjunction,
But by the largess of celestial graces,
Which have such lofty vapours for their rain
That near to them our sight approaches not,
Such had this man become in his new life
Potentially, that every righteous habit
Would have made admirable proof in him;
But so much more malignant and more savage
Becomes the land untilled and with bad seed,
The more good earthly vigour it possesses.
Some time did I sustain him with my look;
Revealing unto him my youthful eyes,

I led him with me turned in the right way.
As soon as ever of my second age
I was upon the threshold and changed life,
Himself from me he took and gave to others.
When from the flesh to spirit I ascended,
And beauty and virtue were in me increased,
I was to him less dear and less delightful;
And into ways untrue he turned his steps,
Pursuing the false images of good,
That never any promises fulfil;
Nor prayer for inspiration me availed,
By means of which in dreams and otherwise
I called him back, so little did he heed them.
So low he fell, that all appliances
For his salvation were already short,
Save showing him the people of perdition.
For this I visited the gates of death,
And unto him, who so far up has led him,
My intercessions were with weeping borne.
God's lofty fiat would be violated,
If Lethe should be passed, and if such viands
Should tasted be, withouten any scot
Of penitence, that gushes forth in tears."

What is the fault that deserves such reproof? Surely not the poet's devotion to philosophy, handmaid of theology: that is no sin; else were St. Thomas Aquinas an archsinner. Dante's guilt, in the eyes of Beatrice, consists, first, in his weakly yielding to a love — a real love — which his conscience did not approve; and,

secondly, in harboring a mundane spirit, a worldly pride that attempted to hide a shortcoming under the cloak of allegory. Let us again turn to Longfellow's version :

“ O thou who art beyond the sacred river,”
Turning to me the point of her discourse,
That edgewise even had seemed to me so keen,
She recommenced, continuing without pause,
“ Say, say if this be true; to such a charge
Thy own confession needs must be conjoined.”

My faculties were in such great confusion
That the voice moved, but sooner was extinct
Than by its organs it was set at large.
Awhile she waited; then she said: “ What thinkest ?
Answer me; for the mournful memories
In thee not yet are by the waters injured.”
Confusion and dismay together mingled
Forced such a Yes! from out my mouth, that sight
Was needful to the understanding of it.
Even as a crossbow breaks, when 't is discharged
Too tensely drawn, the bowstring and the bow,
And with less force the arrow hits the mark,
So I gave way beneath that heavy burden,
Outpouring in a torrent tears and sighs,
And the voice flagged upon its passage forth.
Whence she to me: “ In those desires of mine
Which led thee to the loving of that good
Beyond which there is nothing to aspire to,
What trenches lying traverse or what chains
Didst thou discover, that of passing onward

Thou shouldst have thus despoiled thee of the hope ?
And what allurements or what vantages
Upon the forehead of the others showed,
That thou shouldst turn thy footsteps unto them ? ”
After the heaving of a bitter sigh,
Hardly had I the voice to make response,
And with fatigue my lips did fashion it.
Weeping I said: “ The things that present were
With their false pleasure turned aside my steps,
Soon as your countenance concealed itself.”

Concealment of guilt, Beatrice declares, would have been vain, since God sees all; but when confession is free and full, justice is tempered with mercy. Nevertheless she adds a warning:

To make thee more ashamed of going wrong
And, if again the Sirens thou shouldst hear,
To make thy soul a second time more strong,
I bid thee list, and cease to sow the tear:
Learn why my body buried underground
Should have impelled thee wordly joys to fear.
In art or nature never charm was found
To match my former lovely covering,
Which now in earth is scattered all around.
When I was dead and gone, what mortal thing
(Life's fairest charm having eluded thee)
Should e'er have drawn to it thy chasing wing ?
When wounded first by life's inconstancy,
Seeing that I was constant evermore,
Thou shouldst have spread thy pinions after me.

Thou shouldst have suffered naught thy plumes to lower
To wait for further hurt — nor little maid
Nor other vanity so quickly o'er.

Or, in Dante's own words:

*Non ti dovea gravar le penne in giuso,
Ad aspettar più colpi, o pargoletta
O altra vanità di sì breve uso.*

Pargoletta, "little maid," is a word which we have found more than once applied by the poet, in his lyric verse, to the damsel who represents philosophy; and the repetition of the term in this solemn passage of the *Divine Comedy* is evidently not without special intention. It is likely enough that in Dante's literary circle the whole discussion over the meaning of the group of poems in question had turned on this "*Pargoletta*," on the reality or non-reality of the person designated by it. By calling this maiden a "vanity so quickly o'er," Beatrice appears to take her stand with Dante's critics and against the Dante of the *Banquet*. Like the critics, she interprets the "little maid," not as philosophy, "queen of the universe, most noble and most beautiful daughter of God," but as a creature of flesh and blood. Vainly has the poet striven to assure himself of the innocence of his devotion to her: he is compelled at last to admit that in his love for the "gentle lady" there was something guilty. Let us, in conclusion, cite an incident of the colloquy in Eden, a detail which, in the new light

just acquired, takes on a deep significance. After having drunk of Lethe, which effaces the memory of sin, and of sin alone, Dante suddenly asks Beatrice why she speaks a language so difficult to comprehend.

“In order,” thus she said, “thyself to teach
What fashion thou has followed, how doth plod
Its futile teaching far behind my speech;
To show your human way from that of God
As distant as the highest canopy,
The swiftest heaven, is far from earthly clod.”

Then I replied: “I have no memory
That ever I from your control did stray.
I have no conscience that rebuketh me.”

“Now, canst thou not recall thine altered way,”
She smiling said, “the consequence admire:
Reflect, of Lethe thou hast drunk to-day;
And if from seeing smoke we argue fire,
Thy new forgetfulness is evidence
That guilty was the change in thy desire.”

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